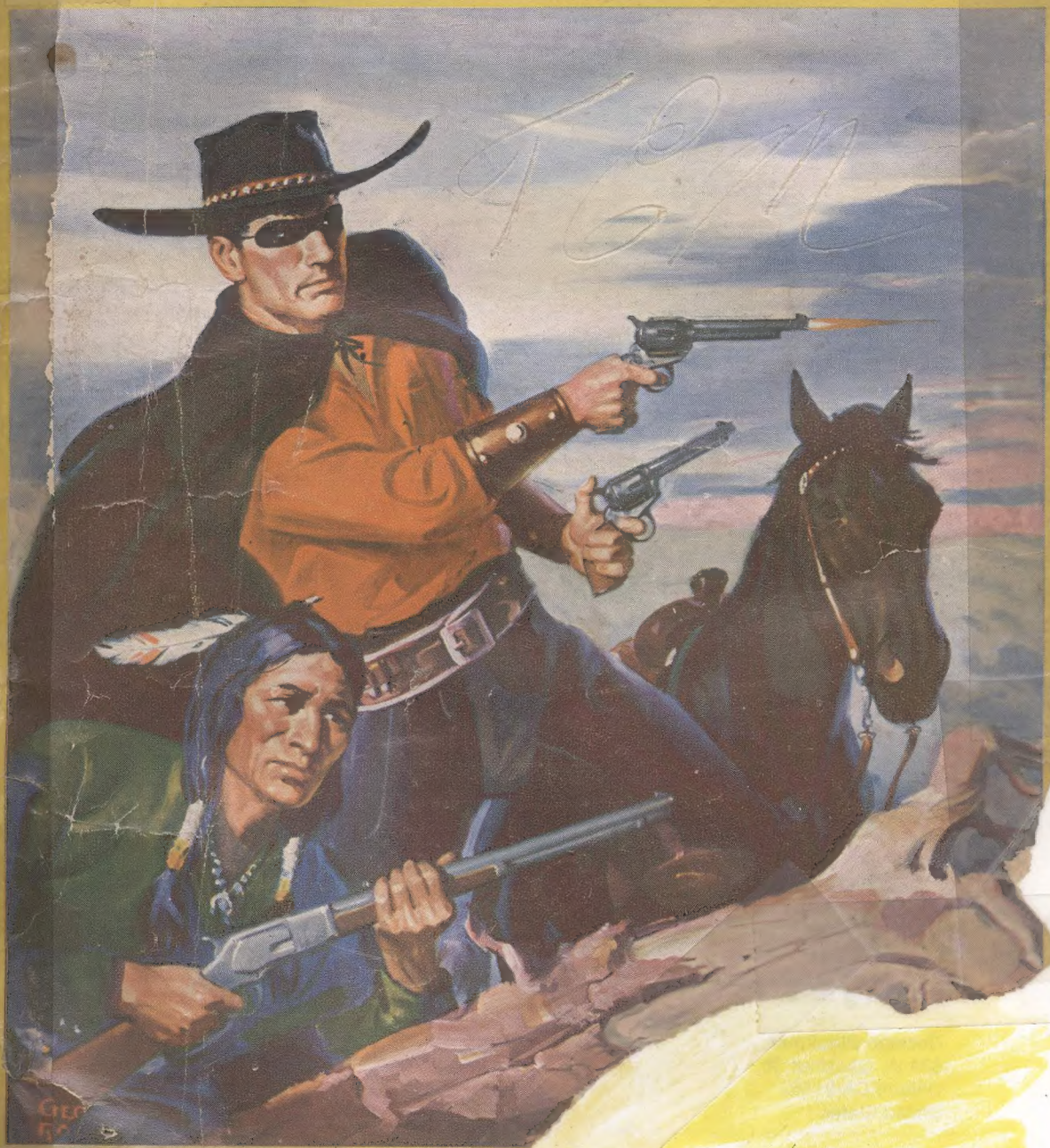
MASKED RIDER WESTERN

OCT.
20 CENTS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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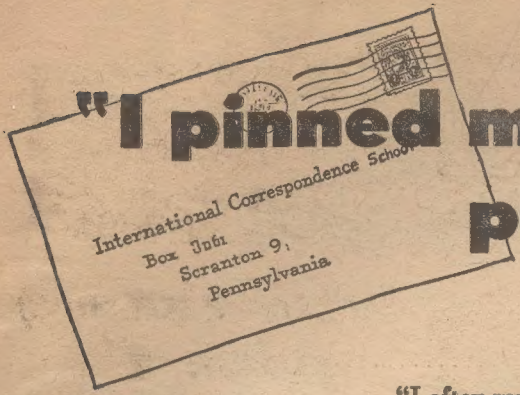

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Vol. XXX, No. 2 OCTOBER, 1951 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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VALLEY OF THE UNDEAD.....T. W. FORD 12
The men who vanished from the Cuidado Plains never came back—until they were resurrected by the flaming six-guns of the Masked Rider!

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A boy's faith in his dog can create miracles

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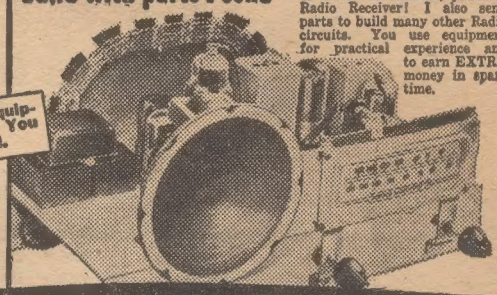

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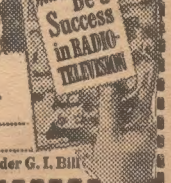

A department of true tales concerning the courageous men who found excitement, adventure, and sometimes death in the quest for gold

Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

THOUGH thrilling jobs were plentiful in the early West, none were more exciting or more filled with constant danger than gold riding. The men picked for this work, often youngsters in their 'teens, had to be small, light, expert horsemen—and fast with a gun.

Gold riding meant running heavy bars of bullion from outlying mines in new bonanza mining districts to the nearest express office for shipment. Once the gold was in the express company's office safe, and receipted for, it was insured. The mine owner could relax.

Often it was a desperate and sometimes lethal version of the old game of hares and hounds the young gold riders of the boom camps played with the road agents and gun thugs out to rob them of the precious yellow metal they carried. Most of the riding was done at night, and the darker the night the better for the gold rider whose trips were never announced beforehand, or made on any predetermined schedule.

Never Lost an Ounce

We knew a gold rider, or rather an ex-gold rider many years ago. In his hell-for-leather days of racing gold from one of New Mexico's richest gold boom towns eighty miles across the desert to the nearest Wells Fargo office, Jim Cross packed upwards of between half a million and a million dollars' worth of yellow metal for his mine owner bosses.

What's more, Jim never lost an ounce of gold, or failed to complete a trip, though he often made decoy trips on successive nights just to check on whether he was being trailed or not. If he was, he simply doubled back, reported the fact, and turned in for a good night's sleep.

Cross, which incidentally is not his real name, was typical of the adventurous youngsters who at one time or another held the job of gold riding in the Southwestern mining country. Born and raised on a mid-West farm, lightly built, fond of horses and honest as the good earth he ploughed in his first kid's overalls, Jim West, in his middle 'teens, was lured West by tales of gold. That was sometime in the early 1880's, and Jim wound up in a booming New Mexico gold town.

Unfortunately it wasn't placer gold that can easily be mined with a pick and shovel and washed out of gravel that made the camp rich. It was lode gold—hard rock mining. Hard rock mining calls for experience and mining skill.

"A Real Nice Lad"

Jim had neither, so he took to strolling up the hastily erected, rickety, false-fronted main street of the town asking the storekeepers for a job. He didn't have much luck until one day a big, well-dressed, beefy-faced man happened to be in a store while he was making his rounds.

The customer was owner of the richest gold mine in the camp. When Jim left with a, "Thank you, sir. I'll try again tomorrow," the mine owner turned to the storekeeper.

"Who's the younker?" he inquired. "Shame those kids leave a farm and decent home to get into a tough place like a boom town mining camp."

"Says his name's Jim Cross. Seems like a real nice lad. He's been to all the mines, but the foremen won't have him. Tell him he's too young, too light, and he don't know a thing about minin'."

"Hmm!" The mine owner ran a thick hand over his red jowls. "Next time you see him,

(Turn to page 8)

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send him out to me. Maybe I can give him a job. They got young Dick Honeycutt last trip —and twenty thousand in gold."

"That so?" The storekeeper shrugged. "I'll tell the boy when he comes in."

Jim listened enthralled as the mine owner explained the job. Later there would probably be a Wells Fargo office in town—if the camp held up. But right now, he said, thousands of dollars' worth of gold was being won out of the mines, and it couldn't be kept in town.

Somebody had to take it across the desert basin to the westward and over a mountain range to Carthage. There the Wells Fargo people would take care of the bullion shipments.

Crime on the Trail

Road agents and gun slicks infested such makeshift roads as existed between the new camp and Carthage. Wagons, stages, even buckboards could be and were frequently held up. Experience had proved a man on a fast horse, cutting across country, avoiding all roads and trails, stood the best chance of getting both himself and his precious burden to the Carthage express office in safety.

The road agents could watch highways at critical points. They couldn't cover either the empty desert or a mountain range for a lone rider. Not easily.

Jim signed on as a gold rider. It was a tough job. Tough enough so that it was considered an honor to be included as a member of the picked and never very large clan.

Four pounds to the thousand dollars was the way the riders used to figure gold bullion. Customarily Jim carried from ten to twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold bars on a trip. He used two horses. One to ride, and a fast pack pony to carry the gold.

For protection Jim had a Winchester carbine in his saddle scabbard, and a heavy, thonged-down Colt belted around his slim waist.

Several notorious gangs of road agents were working New Mexico's rip-roaring mining camps at the time young Jim was a gold rider. They knew Jim by sight, and Jim learned to know most of the owlhooters. Sometimes he would pass them in town, then see the same faces a few days later on the other side of the mountains in Carthage.

Route Changed Frequently

When that happened Jim knew he had been followed, but not how closely, nor how close he might have been to being ambushed. He also knew it was time to work out another route across the desert.

Just twice in his gold-riding days did the hijackers catch up with Jim. Both were times when, suspecting trouble, he had made a false start and the saddle bags of his pack pony were empty.

Though his real destination was always west of the mining camp, Jim might leave town heading north, south or in any direction except the one he eventually intended to take. If he felt the coast was clear, he would circle until he had swung west, then dash for Carthage.

If he suspected he was being followed, he'd short cut back to the mine and wait a better chance.

Tricks of the Trade

There were many tricks to gold riding. Jim learned them all. He traveled, of necessity, with the cunning of a hunted outlaw. His trail twisted, turned and back-tracked. He camped alone under the desert stars at night, and built no telltale fire for evening grub or warmth.

Often he crossed the mountains, following secret canyons that he himself had discovered. And he topped out over passes that were far from the dirt tracks that marked the wagon road to Carthage.

"I'll tell you one thing," Jim used to say to those who knew him in his later years. "Gold riding had its thrills. But every time I dumped those saddlebags full of gold bars on the counter of the Wells Fargo express office, I was the happiest, most carefree kid in the whole Southwest—until it was time to make another trip."

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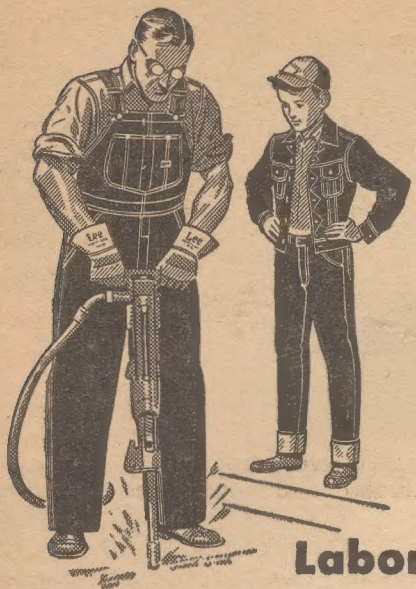

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by Harold Helfer

THE FAMOUS INDIAN, Rain-in-the-Face, once traveled 300 miles in three days on snowshoes.

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BUCKBOARDS may sound kind of romantic in songs, but they were sort of rough—they didn't have any springs.

ARRESTED IN HILLSBORO, TEX., for carrying a pistol, a man declared: "I thought all Texans were supposed to wear guns."

IN CUT BANK, MONT., all cocktail lounges are operated by women bartenders. The town explains: "When we had male bartenders, there were fights in lots of our bars. We decided to try women a few years ago. Since then we've had only two fights, both of 'em out on the street. You don't even hear a cuss word since the ladies took over."

ARIZONA'S CHAMPION mountain lion exterminator, Giles Goswick, has chalked up lion No. 557.

MAINE WAS ONCE one of the No. 1 stomping grounds of the Indian, but a state official recently reported that it is all but impossible to find a full-blooded Indian there today.

ALTHOUGH MOST horses have brown eyes, there are numerous exceptions. Gray eyes occur every now and then among Western broncos and range horses.

ARRESTED FOR CARRYING a revolver by Boston police, a 200-pound Texas ranch girl, Marian Mapell, explained she kept the gun in her bosom to protect herself from "city wolves."

RIDING HORSES bareback seems to have become something of a lost art among the Navajos of Arizona. During the filming of a picture there, only 20 out of 50 Indians needed for a major sequence could ride without saddles. Director Edward Ludwig solved the problem by having the 20 bareback riding Indians in the foreground of the scene. The others were kept in the background, and permitted to use saddles hidden by Indian blankets thrown over them.

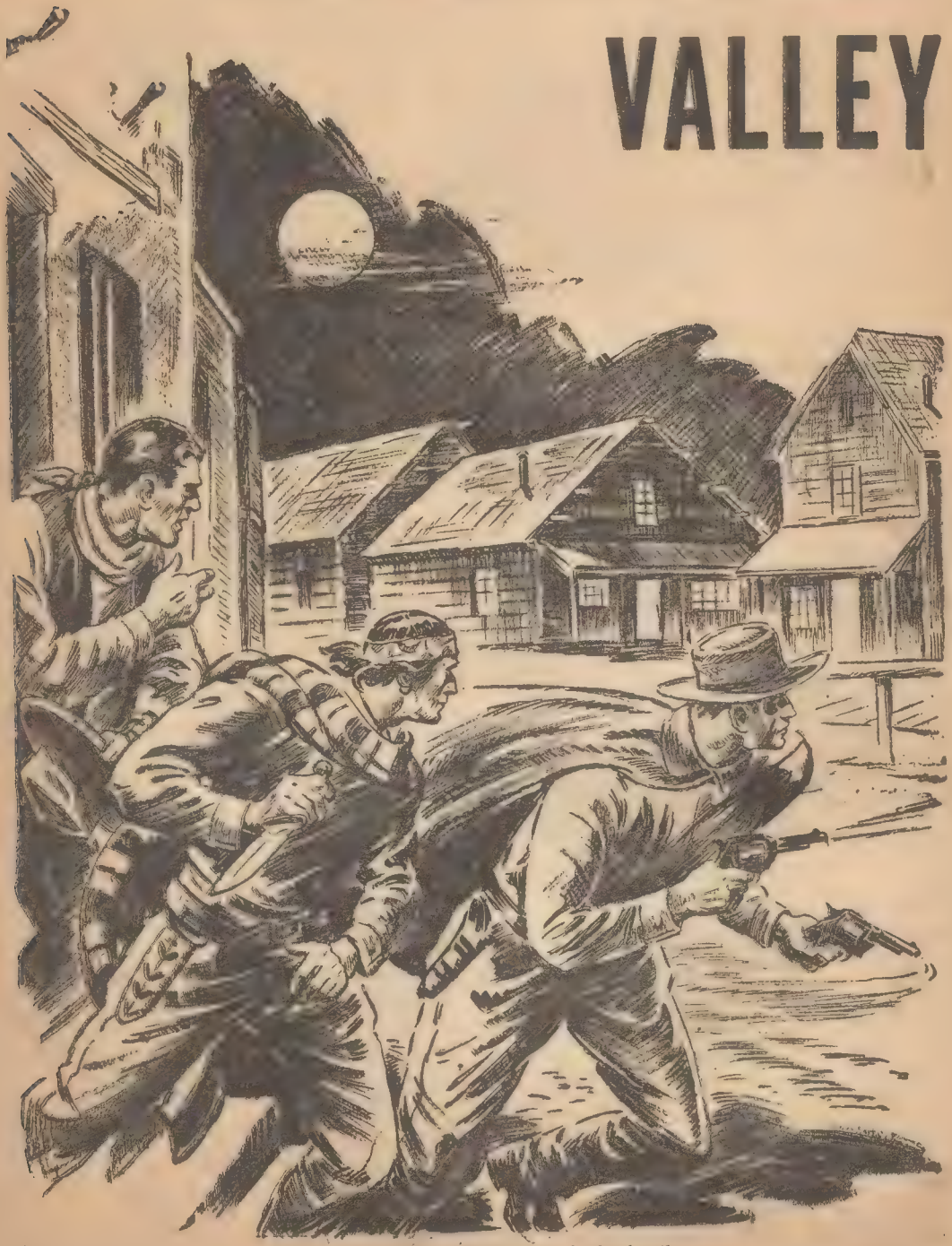
AT BRUDETT, KANS., a mother cat has been nursing a coyote cub. The animal, dug from its den by workmen, was placed among a litter of kittens and the mother cat accepted the chore.

"THE BURRO" is dead. That was the affectionate title given a small daily train between Tucson and Nogales discontinued by the Southern Pacific because it didn't pay. During the heyday of the Mexican Express —its official title—through sleepers were carried from the U. S. to Mexico City lines six times daily.

CARBON COUNTY, WYO., in 1874 had on its assessment rolls 2017 cattle. By 1886 the number had risen to 126,832.

Men who vanished from the Cuidado Plains never came back—till the Masked Rider's guns resurrected them

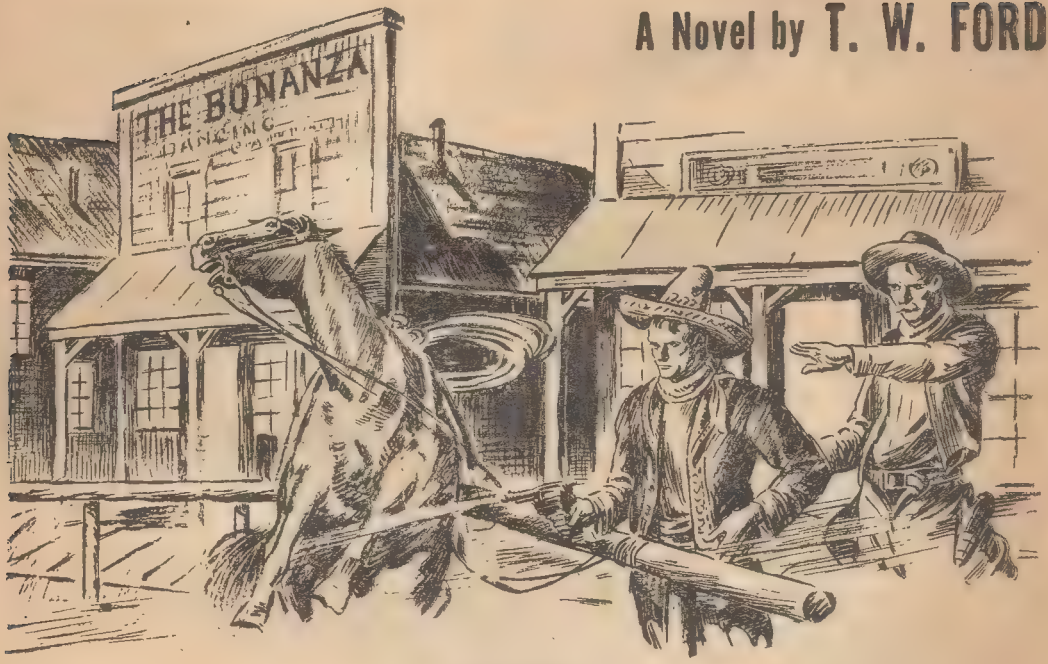
VALLEY



His first slug gashed splinters from the hitch-rail

of the UNDEAD

A Novel by T. W. FORD



CHAPTER I

Bedlam at the Bonanza

AS YOUNG Mal Balban pushed up the trail in the night, he was thinking of those water-holes on his eastern section that needed salting. And that windmill that needed painting. Seemed like you never got caught up with your work, even on a small cow outfit like his. Uncle Tom would be riding out from town Saturday to stay over the week-end. And he was sure to notice every last danged thing.

Mal spat out his quirly stub as he moved along with the canyon of Sudden Water Creek on his left. His uncle was a fine man. But he would harp on a subject till he had it skinned and drawn and the hide nailed to the fence.

His latest theme was the series of mysterious killings and disappearances occurring in the Cuidado Plains country. Nobody could explain them. There seemed neither rhyme nor reason for them. But a slow-creeping wave of violence and bloodshed was shadowing the Cuidado

range and even Cuidado Hill itself. Uncle Tom kept saying something ought to be done.

Young Mal supposed so. But it wasn't any of his business. He had wronged no man, had no feuds or fights to worry about.

Nobody would bother him, a peace-loving gent who—

It happened, as he passed the wooded knoll on the right, as swift as a sidewinder's strike, only without the rattle warning. Without any warning. Mal Balban didn't even know it was happening at first.

Just around the bend in the rough road a man stood in the dimness of the starlit night. He was merely a black figure, arms crossed on his chest, seemingly faceless behind the shadow of the pulled-down hat brim. He said nothing, just stood. Reining up, Mal's hand instinctively dropped to the walnut stock of his single Colts.

"Howdy, mister," he said, puzzled.

The man still said nothing. Then, slowly, making no move toward the white-stocked guns slung at his hips, making no threat, he strode toward Balban. He limped a little, face still blacked out by the shadow of his sombrero. Mal was so intent on him he never heard the faint whispering hiss of the rope. The next instant the loop settled over his shoulders, was whipped tight, pinning his arms to his sides helplessly. He was jerked out of the kak to hit the dust hard, with a bounce.

The night became alive. A cruel rattling laugh broke from the man who'd been stalking toward him. Then two riders spurred out of the trees up ahead. Another hombre appeared out of the brush of the knoll, working down the rope. With him was another who had Balban covered with a cocked pistol.

"Take it easy, Balban," a man said, "and you won't get hurt none. Get ornery—and like this!" He cracked the young rancher sharply across the side of the jaw with his gun-barrel.

IT WAS just enough to half-stun Balban, not to knock him unconscious. The rest of it was like a dream to him. His gun was taken from him, two shots fired from it into the air, then dropped in the dust of the trail where it would eventually be found.

"His head piece," said the big-chested man with the limp and the black hat dragged low over his hidden face.

Balban's sombrero was taken and carefully hooked over a piece of brush at the edge of the lip of the narrow deep canyon at whose bottom the Sudden Water Creek boiled along its tortuous rocky course.

Two other man were already rolling a sizable boulder out from the trees and across the trail. They sent it cracking down the side of the canyon, cutting an obvious swathe through the stunted brush and vegetation on the side of the canyon, such as a corpse thrown down there would leave. A paralyzing chill crept through Mal Balban, dazed as he was, because he sensed the idea.

His arm was grabbed and jerked out level by one of them, the sleeve peeled back. A crossed-eyed, swarthy little man, with a fine yellow silk neckerchief over a stained sweat-smelling shirt, came over with a Bowie blade that had been boned down so it was little more than a dagger. He smiled as he cut a shallow seam in the flesh down Balban's forearm.

"Come on, Balban!"

He was half-dragged over to his standing paint pony and the bleeding arm wiped along the side of the saddle to leave bloodstains.

"That'll do it," the leader said quietly.

The animal was quirted and bolted up the trail, headed homeward.

They tied a rag around the arm cut as their ponies were led from the screen of trees. Mal's wrists were lashed in front of him. Then he was hoisted into the

saddle of one of the horses. The others swung up.

"Where are you taking me?" Balban asked as his head cleared. "What's the idea?" Immediately he knew the queries were foolish.

The swarthy, cross-eyed knifeman on his right answered softly.

"A long, long way, my friend."

* * *

In the big combined dance hall and gambling hell that was the Bonanza, Wayne Morgan, drifting cowboy, stepped to the bar, dropped a silver dollar, and ordered a drink of forty rod. He was in sprawling prosperous Cuidado Hill on a grim mission. Up in Gunsight to the northwest a couple of weeks ago, when he had been helping the local lawman to clean out the lobos' roost down on the river flats, one Tuss Lackner, a two-bit gun tough, had taken a shot at him from behind.

Lackner had missed. But his bullet had badly wounded a man a little ahead of Morgan. The poor devil would be a cripple for life. So Wayne Morgan had taken the lowdown bushwhacker's trail, and finally had picked up word that Lackner was headed to see a relative in Cuidado Hill.

Morgan meant to make him confess to the shooting, then drag him back to face justice in Gunsight. But he had to spot his man first. And it could be dangerous for a pilgrim asking questions in a strange town. He had scoured the place, already buzzing into life in the late drab afternoon. Now here in the Bonanza, the little coal-oil lamps of the two fancy chandeliers were lighted. Out on the dance floor several gents were whirling around with the hostesses to the music of a three-piece

WAYNE MORGAN

Mexican orchestra on a little platform in a back corner.

He became aware of the stare of the big, portly man with a spade beard on his right. As Morgan brought his eyes around, the man hooked his cane over the bar and said:

"Say, seems to me I've seen you before. Maybe down in Little Bend. Or was it Buckton—yes, it was. You was dealin' 'em in a gamblin' hell there. Am I right?"

Morgan nodded. "You're right, mister." He had been posing as a card man in Buckton several months ago for purposes of his own.

"Knew it. Never forget a face. Never." The bearded man finished his drink, picked up his cane. "Well, good day to you, sir." He stalked out.

The gold-toothed bartender, setting out a bottle and a glass before Morgan, regarded him with interest.

"Know who that is? He's our banker—richest man in these parts." He had caught only the tail end of the brief conversation. "Any gent who's a friend of Tom Balban's—well, it means a plenty in this pueblo. Man like Balban can do a heap for a feller if he likes him. Yes-siree."

MORGAN lifted his drink.

"Say, maybe you can help me out. Met a gent from here up the trail—man by the name of Tuss Lackner. Since I happened to be passin' through, I figured to look him up. Maybe you might know good old Tuss."

The barkeep nodded. "He used to come in here a lot. But not no more—and never again, less'n the dead walk. He got tromped to death a couple days back when a mean horse threw him. He—" The barkeep was called away.

Morgan tossed off the drink and turned away from the bar. That business was finished. And Wayne Morgan was just as glad, eschewing violence and bloodshed whenever possible. Jiggling his change in his hand, he looked down at the double doors. Beside them the Yaqui, Blue Hawk, his faithful companion of the trails, lounged against the wall. He was the picture of a lazy somnolent Indian, apparently oblivious to anything happening around him.

He gave no sign that he even knew Morgan. That was the way they played it when they headed into a strange piece of country and trouble threathened, always seeing to it that they were not identified as saddle mates. On this occasion, the Yaqui had ridden into Cuidado Hill with their cavvy of pack animals and extra horses about a half an hour ahead of Morgan.

A coin slipped between Morgan's fingers and rolled toward the dance floor. He slapped a boot on it a few feet from one of the tables girding the dance floor.

"There he is now, coming in from the poker table," he heard the younger of the two house girls at the table say tensely. "I swear I'll make him tell me—if I have to kill him!"

She rose, closing a little bag in her hand. She moved down the edge of the dance floor with the easy swing of a boy.

Morgan's bright blue eyes darted after her. For he had glimpsed the little pearl-handled derringer in that little bag before it had closed. The girl's face was young and fresh, as yet untarnished by life. She was barely more than a girl in her teens with wide, greenish eyes and gleaming black hair that fell to her shoulders. She was small, beautifully molded beneath her black dance frock, and plainly out of place in this honky-tonk. The gun didn't fit the picture at all.

Back at the bar, Morgan saw her go up, smiling, to a big red-haired, gross-faced man stepping out of the gambling room in the rear. They began to dance. A man a few feet from Morgan remarked that "that little Rita" sure was some filly.

Morgan's look followed the dancing pair as they maneuvered into the dim far corner of the place. The girl quickly stepped back a few inches. The red-headed jasper was grinning, then suddenly wasn't, his eyes bugging out. The next moment the couple had disappeared into a rear hallway.

Wayne Morgan hesitated only a mo-

ment. Then he was weaving through the dancers and heading into the hallway himself. He remembered the girl's words about killing.

Halfway down the hall a lamp in a wall bracket prevented him from seeing much beyond it. But when the music ceased up front, Rita's low intense voice reached him.

"Herman, you were there when they got Bob out on the trail. His pony came home with blood on the saddle, as you know. Did they kill him, or what, Herman? Tell me or—"

"I don't know, I tell you," Morgan heard the man say. "And take that dang derringer away from my belly, girl! There was shooting. Bob went down. And I busted the breeze out of there and—"

"You're lying!" the girl snapped him off short. "I went out there and checked the trail sign myself. You cut around that little hill, then rode up the other side of it and watched!"

"Honest, Rita, I didn't. I—"

"Step outside, Herman Tanson!" Rita clipped. "I'll give you one more chance to answer honestly. Don't—and I'm pulling the trigger."

Morgan heard a back door scrape open,

Tanson clutched at his chest and crashed down

heard them going down a couple of steps as he hurried past the wall lamp. He heard Herman Tanson say:

"I tell you, Rita, I don't know—" And they were his last words.

THERE were the blasting reports of three shots from two guns. A crash of thunder in the south engulfed the reverberation of the reports. Reaching the door, Morgan saw the red-headed Tanson half-turning as he clutched at his chest. Crimson leaked through his twitching fingers. Blood was welling around a hole in the side of his calfskin vest, too. Then he crashed beside the little steps as Wayne Morgan leaped out.

Morgan didn't savvy the situation yet. But a glance told him the man just beyond his boots, as good as dead now, had been ambushed. He flashed a quick, drilling look at the girl, including her derringer. No smoke leaked from the barrel, proving the gun had not been fired. Terror stood stark in her wide-flung eyes.

Whipping out his own .45s, he moved out into the yard, sidestepped once, twice. Another long-drawn peal of thunder like artillery fire. He sighted a man slipping away through the high grass. Morgan drew bead on him and rode the trigger twice. The fleeing man dropped to his knees, gripping the top of his right shoulder. In the eerie pre-storm purplish light, Wayne Morgan could clearly make out the yellow neckerchief the man wore.

He rushed out to capture him. Then he flung himself flat as lead whistled by from his left. Twisting around he saw a tall man by the loading platform of the store next to the Bonanza. Morgan got his right elbow propped up. His bullet just nicked the brim of the man's pinch-topped sombrero. The fellow retreated, ducking away. Morgan jumped up, and Rita screamed a warning.

A gunman was just edging around the far back corner of the honky-tonk building, drawing bead on Morgan. The cowboy didn't have to do a thing. The gunman's body suddenly arched forward as his head went back, face screwed up in pain. And he dropped, felled by a sharp blow to the back of the neck at the base of the brain.

Blue Hawk, who had slipped from a side door, glided into view. The downed man had not seen him so he could not connect him with Morgan out there.

Raindrops began to spatter down as Morgan realized that the men who had killed the redhead by the back steps must have had pards covering the front as they waited for the victim to come out.

Morgan beckoned to the girl to come, calling to her. She stood stock-still, shivering with shock. He got over to her as he heard footsteps and the excited voices of patrons piling down that back hall of the honky-tonk. He grabbed her hand.

"Come along, ma'am," he commanded. "You can't get caught here with this dead man!"

He pulled her after him, heading for the rear of the back yard. Thunder crashed like a couple of colliding cannonballs in the heavens. The next moment the rain was coming down in sheets. Just before it enveloped them, Morgan glimpsed two or three more gunslingers coming along the alley at the other side of the place.

Then a wall of rain cut them off.

CHAPTER II

Vengeance Riders

BY THE TIME Morgan and the girl in her skimpy evening dress had worked their way through the broken-down fence at the back, she was drenched. A seam in her skirt had ripped up one side. But she kept running, her hand in Morgan's until they reached a stand of scrawny cottonwoods.

"Wait!" she cried. "I can go back. My gun hasn't been fired, so they'll know I couldn't have killed him!"

"Can you prove you didn't lure him into a death trap?"

Her jaw dropped. When he went on to ask her if she had anywhere to go, she recovered, nodding.

"My boarding house."

They were running again. From behind them, above the spatter of the heavy rain came the sound of boots crashing through brush. They got out on a side street, went to the left. Glancing back through a momentary rift in the torrent of water, Morgan glimpsed the ever-dependable Blue Hawk trailing them, covering their rear. Then they were in a straggling lane, turning up a path to a two-story paint-peeling house. Morgan followed the girl through the doorway without being asked. There were things he wanted to learn.

At a door midway down the upstairs hall, she turned to him.

"Would you mind waiting out here a moment, Mr.—"

"Morgan," he said. "Wayne Morgan, Rita—"

"Rita Lassell." Then she went into the room.

Morgan paced the hall, one hand resting on a gun-butt. He heard a low call, and saw Blue Hawk's gleaming black hair, worn long, pulled back by a red band that girded his forehead. The Yaqui, on the stairs, told him he had their cavvy, their pack ponies and spare mounts, hidden further down the side road. Morgan smiled slightly. He never needed to tell Blue Hawk what to do.

"Any of 'em see where we went, Hawk?" he asked.

The Yaqui shook his head. "I will be out front, Senor." "Senor" was the only name by which he ever addressed his saddlemate.

After he vanished as silently as he had come, Wayne Morgan paced the hall again thoughtfully, a tall man, wide-shouldered, with striking blue eyes. In his levis and hickory shirt, at first glance he might have been taken for just another grubline rider. But there was something about him that wordlessly warned, "Be careful!" When he pulled off his hat to shake the rainwater from it he revealed gleaming black hair.

Many men knew this rider of the trails. And many more had heard of Wayne Morgan, restless gunslinger maverick of the frontier. And yet he was known only to one other, really.

Morgan was not even his real name. But that meant little to the apparently carefree cowboy. As Morgan, he could assume whatever rôle he chose for the time being—just a grubline rider, a horse wrangler, maybe, or a miner. He had posed and worked as a store clerk, even a field worker, at other times as a gambler. And only one man, the Yaqui, knew the big secret of his life, that he was actually the alter ego of the famed seeker for justice and vengeance—when called for—the Masked Rider!

Many times men had seen the famous Masked Rider, astride his giant jet-black stallion, Midnight, pounding to the aid of those in trouble. Black-clad, with a black cape swirling around him, masked, he would strike like some incarnate fury out of nowhere to right an injustice, to take a hand where the Law left off, or couldn't bring justice. For the underdog, the wronged, the weak, he would battle like a madman. And once the issue was settled, almost before the gunsmoke had cleared, he would magically vanish into nowhere, this man who had so well earned, in many places, the sobriquet of Robin Hood outlaw of the West.

For, in some parts of the country, the Masked Rider was a wanted man, with a price on his head, because ruthless, evil men had committed many crimes in his name. Traps had been set for him. But because of his dual life, being Wayne Morgan, too, he had always been able to escape them.

The Yaqui, Blue Mawk, was his one real friend, the sole person who really knew him, although even he knew nothing of the Masked Rider's former life, nor did he ever ask. A stalwart Indian, and an upstanding fighting man, he preferred to do his work, when necessity required, with the prized knife he carried in a beaded pouch slung from his belt. Though he did carry a Winchester and an Osage orange bow on his saddle. A graduate of a mission school, intelligent and sincere, he had dedicated his life to backing

this fearless Robin Hood of the sagebrush country.

AS BLUE HAWK disappeared now, the pacing Wayne Morgan turned as he heard the girl's door open. And his eyes jumped wide in surprise at the picture she made.

Gone were the soaked evening dress, the high-heeled shoes. Now she stood there in white riding breeches, black boots, a dark blue silk shirt open at the throat. Her black hair, hastily rubbed almost dry, tumbled to her shoulders in curling disarray. She was a far cry from a dancehall hostess who might lure a man out to threaten him with a gun. Instead she looked like the daughter of some wealthy cattle baron.

She laughed low in her throat at his astonished look. But as she beckoned him inside the room, she became grave, her shoulders quivering as she fought down dry sobs. The shock was catching up with her, Morgan realized. He waited. She finally got a check rein on herself, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"He's dead, Herman Tanson. I couldn't have done anything. But, Mr. Morgan, words are too weak ever to thank you."

"Why did you mean to kill him if he wouldn't tell you something?" Morgan said quietly.

She didn't deny it, for which he admired her. "I don't think I really would have killed him. But I would have put a bullet in his leg, I guess, to make him talk—if I had to. My brother, Bob Lassell, was jumped on the trail and has disappeared. I don't know whether he's dead or alive." Her head bent. But she went on talking. "It's just another case of what's happening in the Cuidado country. His pony came home with bloodstains on the saddle. And Tanson had been with him when it happened."

"Then Tanson might've known who jumped your brother?"

She nodded. "Yes-s, Mr. Morgan. The very fact that he feared to talk proves something. And now—he'll *never* talk." Her voice broke. "They did it! They have been terrorizing this range country!"

"'They'?" Morgan repeated. "Doesn't anybody know who 'they' are, Miss Rita?"

She shook the bent black head. "No. Old Sam Dustin came upon them once and swears the leader is *El Aracnido*, the Spider, an outlaw from below the Line. He came from these parts originally. He was known as Spider Vines up here. But he died of smallpox down in Redville on the Rio months back. Buried there. So it couldn't be the Spider. If I only knew about my brother, whether he's alive!"

Morgan asked her some questions. He wanted to know if her brother had had any enemies. Or was it *dinero* they were after? Had her family received a note demanding ransom? To all she shook her head. There was no family. Her mother had died when they were children. Her dad, Texas Jack Lassell, who'd built up the biggest spread in the Cuidado country, had been taken by a stroke.

"Dad was a hard-living man, loved cards. The place was heavily mortgaged, Mr. Morgan. Still everything would have been worked out if the spread had been run right. But Bob—well, he had the same weakness for gambling."

He had depleted the Loop L herds until there had been little left but culls and strays. Lost the money across the baize-topped tables. Then a second mortgage. And that money had gone the same way. The ranchhouse was shut up now, and she was working at the Bonanza to try to keep up the mortgage interest payments.

"I was just getting Bob straightened up, too."

Morgan shook his head, baffled.

"It doesn't make sense, I know, what's going on," she added, seeming to read his mind. "There was no more reason for it than there was for the slaying of Miles Scane." Scane's body, she told Morgan, had been found in an old quarry pit, with two slugs in the back, and the bashed-in face had been an unrecognizable mask of dried-blood. They had been able to identify him only by his clothes.

"His wife knew what he was wearing."

"And then?" Something told Morgan there was more.

"Well—a couple of weeks ago, Miles Scane's cousin, Mike Scane, went loco." She paused to nod as he asked permission to smoke. There was a prolonged but distance-muffled rumble of thunder. The storm had passed on. "He was captured trying to hold up the Cumberton stage. Mike had always been a straight, honest man, too. There were two men with him who got away. But the muleskinner was killed. When he stands trial, Mike'll probably get the rope and—"

THERE was a soft knock on the door. Morgan opened it. It was Blue Hawk with an envelope for Rita. A boy had handed it to him at the door. The Yaqui glided away without being seen by Rita.

Rita slit open the envelope to draw out a piece of rough paper. The writing was crude and in pencil, Morgan noted. Her teeth met with a sharp click as she finished reading it. Stiffly she walked back to the bed and sat down. A little moan came from her as her greenish eyes stared at the fist that held the crumpled note.

"What's wrong, Miss Rita?" When she failed to answer, Morgan said, "I know there's trouble. Could I please see that, ma'am?"

Her eyes glanced up to his face, eyes that were hard and hostile now.

"No! No!" her taut voice stabbed at him as he put out a hand for the note.

Her own right hand darted up under the pillow. The next moment it was holding the pearl-handled derringer squarely on Morgan's broad chest.

"Get out of here!" she said with icicles suddenly in her voice.

As he stepped back in amazement, she rose, a little hellcat with claws unsheathed. She shoved the note down inside the V of her shirt.

"Get out—get out of here and leave me alone!"

Going down the stairs, Wayne Morgan, a keen student of human nature, realized that Rita had actually acted like a cornered animal, frightened, desperate, forced to turn on anybody. It was the only explanation of her sudden reversed reaction to him. But it roused his suspicions, too. A person in her straits might adopt any rôle in a moment of frenzy.

He stepped outside into the cool damp air of the twilight, the rain having ceased completely. Blue Hawk moved away from a big tree in the lane. In the dim light, they were just blurred figures. So, as the alert Morgan realized, there was little chance of anybody noticing them, much less figuring them to be partners.

Blue Hawk had some information. While keeping watch off to one side of the front door of the boarding house, he'd got into conversation with an old coot passing by en route home.

"He had had a few drinks, Senor," the Yaqui said, with a knowing wink. "He talked plenty. There is great trouble in the country. Men are being spirited away after apparent ambushes and gunfights. Sometimes a body is found, as in the case of one Miles Scane. Sometimes, nothing.

[*Turn page*]

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It is believed the missing man is dead because nobody ever hears from any of them again."

"What about the Law?" Morgan put in. "They've got a sheriff here."

The intelligent Hawk had asked the old man about that.

"The sheriff has led out posses. Always, they find nothing. A cold trail that runs out somewhere in the rough country. That is all. Nobody knows why this thing is being done. But they are getting scared. They call it the 'Scourge,' what has hit the Cuidado country. 'Strange things are happening,' was the last thing the old one said before he went on, Senor."

Morgan nodded. Never in all his experience had he encountered such a mysterious situation. Men being kidnaped, perhaps slain, bodies seldom found, but disappearing from human ken forever. And no apparent motive, no known reason. It couldn't have been robbery. That was proved by the case of the hoeman, Miles Scane.

Down near the corner there was a Chinese eating place. Morgan remembered they'd had no grub since that forenoon out on the trail. He spoke to Hawk, then moved on down the side road alone, entering the place. At a rear table, he was ordering a steak with a side order of eggs and a pot of coffee when Hawk shuffled in and dropped down at a table facing the door. They ate.

Wayne Morgan was doing "a heap of stall-walking" over his second cup of coffee when, through the front window, he saw two men slowly walk past the place. He expelled quirly smoke, trying to remember them. Vaguely they seemed like the same pair he had seen pass by a little before. In a few minutes the one with the cream-hued sombrero sauntered by the window in the other direction.

The Chinese was already blowing out the oil lamps in front preparatory to closing up as Morgan left. He paid no heed to the Yaqui. They had arranged to meet in the alley on one side of the Bonanza. It was an old tactic of theirs to take such precautions in a strange pueblo when it looked as if blood was due on the moon.

Morgan stepped out the doorway with one of his drawn Colts held down against the side of his leg. He had a hunch that he had been spotted in the flight from the honky-tonk with the girl. Maybe "they", whoever they were, meant to cut him down now.

BUT nothing happened as he headed for the main street. Down there, the coal-oil torches at the doorways of whisky mills and dance halls doused the road with fitful light, playing on the big puddles. Jostled by the throng on the wooden sidewalks, he got down to the Bonanza, eased into the alley. There were a couple of quick shots from somewhere behind the buildings.

"The drunks are startin' early tonight," a man on the walk remarked.

Morgan bumped against a stone post just in front of the head of the alley as he slipped into the darkened way. After a few minutes, when he was certain he was not being followed, he edged ahead to look at the strange stubby post. He discovered it was a four-sided polished little pillar of gray stone like something that might be found in a graveyard. On the front of the slanting base was a metal plaque.

He hunkered down to read the inscription on it:

On This Spot, My Beloved Brother, Absalom Vines, Was Murdered in Cold Blood
Adam Vines

There was a date. But the plaque had been damaged at that spot, and Morgan couldn't make it out.

"Loco, isn't it, stranger?" The speaker was the big, gray-haired man with the spade beard to whom Morgan had talked in the saloon. He looked pompous, rigged out in a gray frock coat, and with his gold-headed cane. He tapped the little strangely-located monument with the cane.

"It's a lie, too. Ab Vines was shot down here in fair-shake gunfight after he'd tried to get his man from behind. Crake was the other man. A card dealer who lived in town. Both men had been after the same girl. Crake won her and married her.

And Ab Vines, a vengeful critter, never forgave him."

Wayne Morgan nodded, not breaking in. The name of Vines, had clicked in his mind. Rita had mentioned *El Aracnido,* the outlaw who had come from this town where he had been known as Spider Vines.

"It happened late at night—or, really, early in the morning, after every place was closed up," the impressive man with the cane continued, a far-away look in his eyes. "Smiley Crake was going home from his work. Vines trailed him and tried to get him from behind, as I said. But Crake turned in time and shot Vines instead. Fired several times. Vines turned and ran. That's how the last slug caught him in the back. He died about two days later."

Wayne Morgan nodded again. "What happened to Crake?"

"Well, before Ab Vines died he swore he'd been drygulched, that Crake had been laying in wait for him. He signed a statement to that effect. But it so happened there were seven witnesses to the affair that early dawn. I was one of them. We testified. And old Judge Bowers threw the case out of court, freeing Crake, without even handing it to the jury. Hmmm."

"Did Ab Vines have any sons?"

The other man nodded, his mind going back years ago.

"Crake and his wife moved away a little later. Crake himself died 'bout a year later. Adam Vines, Ab's older brother, convinced Ab had been drygulched, bought this little strip of ground 'tween these two buildings, put up this monument, then passed away himself the same year. Yes-s, there was one son, George, a sort of half-locoed younker, just a button then. He went around swearing he'd get Crake some day. Then he went away too. Went—"

"Howdy, Tom Balban," a tall sandy-mustached cowman greeted the man in the gray frock coat, hand outstretched. "Ain't seen you in a dog's age, Tom. Was into your office in the bank yesterday but you was away."

CHAPTER III

Wounded Mystery Man

AS THE TWO men began to chat Blue Hawk came up behind Wayne Morgan from the back of the alley.

"Senor, I am sorry to have kept you waiting," the Yaqui said in his precise English, "but I was delayed by a little trouble. I saw the two men who kept walking by the restaurant and looking in. So I left by the back door."

But there had been a couple of others waiting back there, too. They had thrown lead at him. However, the clever Hawk had given them the slip, had looped around, and come up silently behind the Bonanza.

Morgan frowned, feeling a slow anger. So Blue Hawk was a marked man in this pueblo now. Those bushwhackers who'd got Tanson had probably spotted the Indian behind the Bonanza. Now—

There was a commotion down the road. A limping man leaped for the safety of the gutter. A rider hurriedly wheeled his cayuse to one side. And a careening ranch wagon with a two-horse team came hurtling around. A woman drove them, reins in one hand, whip in the other, yellow hair flying. As she started to haul in the foam-flecked horses, Morgan saw two youngsters sitting in the bed of the wagon. Then she was swinging the wagon in before the yellowed adobe jail a little further along the line and across the road.

"Great Gawd!" burst out Tom Balban, the banker. "Marie, my nephew Mal's wife! Something must be wrong."

Tails of his frock coat flying out behind him, he headed for the jail on a dead run.

Wayne Morgan, scenting trouble, got there before him, was in the van of the crowd that was gathering quickly. The self-effacing Blue Hawk waited just a few feet from him but, to all appearances, not with him. Sheriff Macklin, a big, thick-bodied man with a huge beak of a red

nose that gave him an almost clownish look, had just gone up the path to the jail door from a patrol of the town's whisky mills and honky-tonks.

"Sheriff—sheriff!" cried Marie Balban, leaping down over the wheel of the wagon. She was a tall woman, young, blonde with braids of hair hanging down her back. "Sheriff Macklin, they got my Mal! They killed him and threw him into Sudden Water Creek. They— Oh-h, they bushwhacked him out on the trail—" Her voice broke. She was close to hysteria.

Tom Balban stepped up and laid a quieting hand on her shoulder.

"Marie, get a grip on yourself," her husband's uncle commanded sternly. "Maybe he isn't dead. Git calm and tell us what happened, Marie!"

"Mal was supposed to be back from town some time last night," she said, as the growing bunch of townsfolk strained to listen. "Late, his pony came in with blood on the saddle. The bunkhouse hands, neither of them, told me anything. They went out looking for Mal."

Today they had come back in with the bad news, the fired gun, and the sombrero in the road at the edge of the Sudden Water Creek canyon. And the telltale swath through the brush on the canyon side.

"They threw his body down into Sudden Water! We'll never find it now!"

Sheriff Joe Macklin hunched the thick shoulders of his massive frame, fingered the star on his vest. "Nothing we can do at night, this long after the crime. But I'll get up a posse and go out there and see if we can coldtrail 'em down come morning, Miz Balban. Still—"

"Wait!" Tom Balban brandished his cane. "I hereby offer a reward of one thousand dollars—one thousand dollars—to the man who can find out who killed my nephew, to the man who can name him! He don't have to capture him! Just find out *who* he is, and *where* he is! Now, come along home with me, Marie."

"The Scourge," muttered a man next to Wayne Morgan.

"Yeah, it's The Scourge again, all right," a companion agreed. "And they won't find any trail, or anything. They never do. Balban's poor wife! He was just buildin' up his outfit, gettin' it on its feet."

"Uh-huh. Sure is a damn shame. But they'll never catch The Scourge. They don't even know who he is."

Those words put the final seal of determination on it for Wayne Morgan. He was buying chips and sticking to the finish.

MORGAN drifted back to the Bonanza, hoping to get a word with Rita Lassell. She didn't appear until late in the evening, pale, her gestures jerky and nervous. She immediately joined a dapper little drummer wearing a stovepipe hat, at a table as Morgan headed toward her. He returned to the bar where he could watch her, hoping to catch her alone.

He had his hands full, in the bargain, having to keep a watchful eye peeled for those coyotes who had been prowling around the eating place. He always kept one hand near a gun-butt. And he repeatedly cut his eyes toward Blue Hawk, leaning indolently and sleepy-eyed just inside the front door, alert for a warning sign from him.

Morgan drifted down near Hawk a moment as a half orey-eyed customer tugged at the Yaqui's shoulder, wanting to buy him a drink at the bar. Morgan sneered at Hawk as he steered the persistent man away.

"The dumb Injun knows they won't sell him a drink, *amigo*. Leave him alone."

He flipped two bits back at the Indian. Nobody would have guessed they were pards.

Rita danced with the sleek-haired little drummer when the music started up. Morgan tried to signal her. She didn't seem to see him. Another man joined her and the drummer at the table and fresh drinks were served. Morgan waited and waited to catch her alone. She always seemed to be engaged. Finally Morgan swung up behind her as she left the dance floor with another customer.

"Miss Rita, it's right important I have

a word with—"

"I'll see you in twenty minutes," she whispered to him.

The twenty minutes passed. Then it was a half hour. Midnight came. He went up to another of the girls, who told him that Rita had quit early, not feeling well. Anger churning in him, he stalked up the lane to the boarding house. Pop, the proprietor, finally opened up, after Morgan had hammered on the door for quite a spell. Peering past the lamp he held, he stood shivering in a nightshirt that hung like a tent on his wizened frame. When Morgan asked to see Miss Rita, Pop said she was staying with one of the girls who lived at the dance hall place. She had told him she would before leaving that evening.

By the time Hawk had led the furious Morgan up the side road where he had hidden their little cavvy, Morgan was talking to himself. Mounting, he and the Yaqui pushed on up the side street that petered out to a straggly grass-grown track. It ran down the end of the hill on which the town, Cuidado Hill, stood. Ran out through second-growth timber, through heavy brush, past a strip of mesquite jungle, almost in the shadow of the big bluffs that bowed out toward the north side of Cuidado Hill.

It was the lynx-eyed Yaqui who, a little more than two miles from town, spotted the faint almost overgrown path that branched off to the left in the glow of the big cheese-yellow moon. He dropped from his cayuse and trotted up it soundlessly, vanishing into a clump of leaf-whispering saplings. A minute or so passed and he reappeared, calling to Wayne Morgan and waving for him to ride in.

It was a perfect setup for their purpose. Back behind the stand of saplings, almost unnoticeable in the heavy tangled undergrowth, an abandoned cabin stood in the lee of a jutting elbow of the rock of the bluff. A rider going down the trail outside would never suspect the cabin was there.

The door hung on one rusty hinge. The

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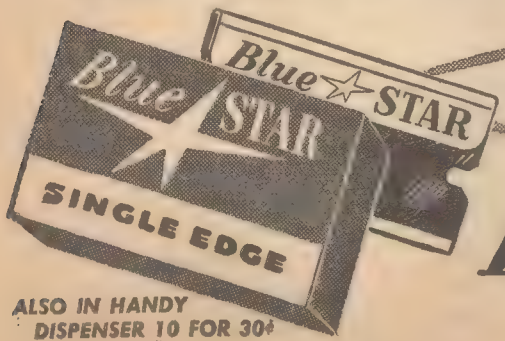

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two windows had almost half their panes stuffed with rags. There was no furniture inside save an old table. But Morgan and Hawk, like true riders of the out-trails, could manage to make themselves comfortable anywhere. Hawk picketed the ponies in the clearing at a spot where they could graze. The two men had coffee boiled over a tiny fire, then turned in, rolled in their blankets on the dirt floor of the cabin, using their saddles as pillows.

But Morgan did not cork off at once. He lay there trying to add things up. A struggling hoeman, Miles Scane, apparently slain. Then, for some mysterious reason, his cousin, Mike, goes haywire and tries to hold up a stage. Rita Lassell's impoverished, amiable brother killed or spirited off. Tanson, a man who was with him at the time, who had seen something, gunned down so he wouldn't talk. And now Mal Balban, nephew of Banker Balban, apparently shot dead on the trail and his corpse thrown down into the fast-running creek.

And for all this, no motive. No apparent purpose about it.

Wayne Morgan turned on his side and shut his eyes. He knew he would have to learn one or the other, perhaps both, of the last two things before he would have a real clue to this killer who had become known as "the Scourge." Who he was and where he hung his head piece. Or if he could discover his motive—

Morgan was fast asleep.

THE next morning, the two trailmates finished a mess of grub a little after sunup. Blue Hawk was stamping out the fire he'd made of dead dried wood so there would be no telltale smoke when gun reports came from the south off in the direction of Cuidado Hill. They broke off as Morgan listened intently, hand on a gun butt. Just a few minutes later, a horse pounded by out on the trail, headed north.

"That horse is wounded, I think," Blue Hawk said, as the hoofbeats waned. "Or badly lamed, anyway, Senor. The rider is fleeing—somebody."

Shortly came the drumbeats of several ponies headed north along the trail. They, too, went on by the hidden cabin. By that time Wayne Morgan had slipped through to the front of the stand of screening saplings. He recognized one of the quartet of riders by the bright yellow neckerchief he wore—the ambusher he had wounded right after Tanson had been slain last night. He rode now with his right arm strapped to his side, the lump of bandaging over the shoulder humping up his dirty shirt.

Morgan came back to the cabin, plumb certain now that those riders were the "they" of whom Rita Lassell had spoken, the "they" who'd got Mal Balban.

"Hawk," Morgan said, "let's get saddled up. I aim to pick up their trail."

He had just gotten the kak cinched on his rangy-built hammerhead roan when there was that crashing in the brush up by the bluff. Like a shadow, Blue Hawk glided into the saplings. Morgan slipped over behind the corner of the cabin. About a minute later a man appeared, stumbling to the edge of the clearing, clutching a tree for support.

"Any-body here?" he gasped.

He was a lanky sandyhaired man, his beard-stubbled face a haggard mask. His sombrero was gone. One side of his head was stained with dried blood. His small bloodshot eyes stared glassily around.

"I—I gotta g-get—water," he muttered, then fell on his face as he lost his hold on the tree. He was unaware of Morgan running to him.

Morgan picked him up and carried him over to prop him up against a stump in the clearing. Blue Hawk came back from the spring with a fresh-filled water bag. Gently Morgan worked some water between the man's lips, then poured more over his face.

Hawk got the fire restarted from the embers, and shortly came over with a pan of boiling water. Dipping a bandanna into it, Wayne Morgan washed away the clotted blood on the man's head. A deep bullet gash across the side of his skull, ugly, smack against the bone was revealed. The Yaqui had slit open the man's

trouser leg over the wound there. It was purplish and festered, the slug still in there somewhere. Morgan knew now that this was the fugitive they had first heard pounding up the track.

The man coughed, then opened his eyes. But he was unaware of them as he started to talk to himself aloud.

"Reckon I sure fooled 'em. Yup—thought—they had me, th-they did. Horse wounded and them closin' in—" His head wobbled as he talked in a heavy whisper. "Got—off and—and sent horse hightailing on. I left the trail and—and—" His head sagged.

Morgan got more water down his throat.

"Who was after you, mister?" he asked.

"Who?" The man laughed weakly, sarcastically. "He doublecrossed me down on the Rio, the dirty coyote. I finally follered him up here—"

"Who?" Morgan insisted. He had a hunch, founded on hope perhaps, that it was the man known as the Scourge. "Who is this coyote?"

The wounded man's mouth formed words, perhaps a name. But no sound came. Morgan gave him more water. A cough threw the poor devil forward, away from the stump for a moment. And inside the sagging shirt, Morgan saw the fresh scabs and half-closed welts on the man's back. He had been brutally lashed fairly recently. When Morgan wiped the man's face again with the damp bandanna he could feel the pulsing heat of the raging fever in him.

"Slick as a danged sidewinder he is, this—" He grimaced as he pawed at his head. "Half killed me— Lucky to get away alive and—"

MORGAN was about to ask "who" again when he saw that the man was unconscious once more.

In the cabin was a broken-down Teton pole cot in one corner. Morgan and Blue Hawk had disdained it last night. They propped up the broken leg with a small boulder, then arranged some blankets on it. In a few minutes they had the wounded man stretched out on it.

"I'll get him yet—yep—Big Ralph never quits," the man mumbled thickly, then began to breath heavily as he sank off.

Morgan sent Hawk into town to get a doctor. He wanted to be here himself with his guns, in case the manhunters should swing back, find the wounded man's tracks.

"Hogtie the pill roller if you have to, Hawk," he said. "This gent might be able to help us, give us the key, to all this mystery around here, if he can be pulled through."

About two hours later the Yaqui returned, practically herding one Dr. Sharpe before him. The doc was an undersized man with an oversized mustache and the bloated red nose of a heavy drinker. He snorted through it when he examined Big Ralph. Morgan had slid from sight amidst the saplings at their approach so he wouldn't be connected with Blue Hawk. From his hiding place he watched through the doorway as Sharpe went to work, first extracting the chunk of lead from the unconscious man's leg. He scowled as he cleaned out the gash in the head, then bandaged it. From a scuffed little satchel, he produced a vial of pinkish pills, got the man on the cot to swallow two.

"Give him a couple in the morning and two more at night," he ordered as he handed the vial to Blue Hawk. "Help to keep the fever down. Nothing to do now but wait. It's hit or miss." He explained that the slug had grooved the skull bone, possibly cracking it, and certainly putting pressure on the brain inside. "Maybe he'll regain consciousness. And maybe—" He shrugged.

After he left, Morgan came from cover and stood staring down at Big Ralph. There wasn't much question that Ralph had tracked down to his hideout the man who had doublecrossed him. Or been taken there after capture. And that man, Morgan was dead sure after seeing Yellow Neckerchief in the pursuing bunch, was the Scourge.

If only Big Ralph came out of his coma and would talk!

CHAPTER IV

No Word Is Said

TWO QUERIES kept hammering in Wayne Morgan's mind as he and the Yaqui rode into Cuidado Hill after darkness had come, from their camp under the bluffs.

"Who? And where?"

Before they left the camp, Big Ralph's fever seemed to have abated, though he still slept like the dead. But there was still another question. Would he live to tell what he knew?

"Who? And where?" Wayne Morgan's lips formed the words soundlessly. Who was the Scourge? And where was his hideout? Until he learned the first there was little chance of learning the second, or any sense in it. It was tantalizing. If he should stumble across the hombre, he wouldn't know him, or guess that he had crossed his path.

He had two aims in coming to Cuidado Hill again. He meant to pin down Rita Lassell, to have a parley with her. But first he wanted to see Tom Balban, the banker. From another rider, as he rode into town, he learned where Balban lived. It was in a neat, white two-story cottage on a side street, not far around the corner from the Ranchers' Bank and Trust Company of which Tom Balban was president.

When Morgan reached the cottage, lamplight shone through drawn shades. Balban himself, in shirt sleeves with fancy blue garters, answered the door.

With a quiet impressiveness, Morgan introduced himself, mentioned that he had worked with the Law before, naming a few places and producing proof of his words.

"I'm sort of interested in this case of your nephew, Mr. Balban. If I could speak to his wife—"

"She's in bed, suffering from shock," Balban said curtly.

Morgan eased toward the threshold as the banker started to close the door.

"That's too bad. I want to help. Maybe you could give me some details and—"

Balban scowled, heavy brows drawing down. "Don't think so," he snapped, but plainly ill at ease. "I—well, I may withdraw that reward offer. Might cause trouble or something. Might get innocent men shot up. After all we don't even know who we're after. I'm right busy, so-o—" He slammed the door.

Morgan and Blue Hawk had dinner, separately, at another eating place. Morgan's mouth was hard-set as he smoked a quirly over his second cup of coffee. It was maddening, illogical, Balban's refusal even to talk. Morgan figured that somebody must hold a club over him somehow, forcing him to pull in his horns. That meant that Morgan somehow had to make Rita Lassel be frank with him, if she was playing it on the square.

He headed for the Bonanza, with Blue Hawk following.

It was a couple of hours before Rita appeared, with the evening in full swing. She looked drawn and pale again, and a haunted look was in her eyes. Morgan watched her as she danced with a big, flashily garbed man who was obviously a gambler. As the little orchestra paused between numbers, Morgan stalked onto the floor, smiled at her big escort.

"Miss Rita sort of promised me the next dance, mister," he said, and before either could say anything, he had an arm around the girl's supple waist and was wheeling her away to the waltz that had been struck up. "Miss Rita," he said frigidly as he whirled her in a corner, "either we have a little private talk or I'm dropping down to tell the sheriff about how you forced Tanson outside to the spot where he was gunned down."

A black-garbed house guard put a hand on the girl's arm. "Ralston wants to see you in the office, ma'am," he murmured.

Morgan sensed it was a trick, that she had signaled the man.

"Now just wait a moment, feller. I—"

Then he felt the muzzle of a gun in somebody's coat pocket against his back,

looked over his shoulder to see another house guard.

"We don't want no trouble," the first one said. "How about waiting over at the bar a few minutes, and I'll have some word for you. Eh?"

There was no alternative for Wayne Morgan. Rita had disappeared in the rear. But, to his surprise, a few minutes later, one of those housemen did come down and slip a note in his hand as he passed. Morgan read the hurried writing:

I am watched every moment. It is dangerous for me to be seen with you. Come to the boarding house tonight about a half hour after closing time here. R.

He wondered if this was another trick, a new subterfuge. But he delayed leaving, combing the room with his eyes to see if he could determine who, if anybody, had her under surveillance.

THERE was a roar of laughter, mixed with feminine shrieks and laughter from a table at the other side of the dance floor. Three of the joint's brassy-haired hostesses sat at the table with a short man in a silver embroidered green bolero. He was swarthy, his dark hair greased down until it looked like lacquer. He might easily have passed for a Mexican.

On his table were bottles of Silver Pinto whisky, the house's best brand, and bottles of wine. When the man got up to lead a girl out to dance, Morgan noted that he moved with a limp. When the man and girl returned to the table, Green Bolero flashed a look to a lanky man lounging against a post a few feet away. A bodyguard, Morgan guessed. Green Bolero caught the arm of another passing hostess and demanded she join the party. When one of the other girls rose to leave, Morgan saw Green Bolero toss her a fifty-dollar bill.

He seemed harmless enough, some hombre who had hit the jackpot and was out for a big night. Morgan looked away from him, had just cut his eyes to Blue Hawk down beside the doorway, when a little party, headed by Sheriff Joe Macklin, came bursting in. Macklin had a gun down against his leg. A deputy and three armed townsmen were with him. A skinny man with them, a fellow built like a fencepost, suddenly leveled a bony finger at Blue Hawk.

"That's him! That's him, allright, Sheriff! The Injun! He was out there in back when Tanson was killed. I swear it, Sheriff." The accuser bobbed his pin head vehemently. "I saw him running away out back after it happened. He's the killer, the dang Injun!"

Blue Hawk stood, imperturable as stone, as the sheriff bore down on him.

"Well, you got anything to say, Injun?" Macklin demanded. "Got an alibi, huh?"

Wayne Morgan had already started over from the bar. The head house guard, a stocky man with a thin, precisely shaped black mustache, who always stood watch near the front doors, moved into the picture.

"Yes—why sure, that's him, the killer, that Injun!" he exclaimed, and thrust out his head toward Hawk as if to study him closer. "Strange I didn't notice him before. But I remember that red band around his hair now. I was just coming to work down that lane out back. I heard the shots, Sheriff. Then I saw that Injun there come running out from the back yard. Then the rain came."

Morgan was there by then, impulsively set to save his trail partner. It was a plain frame-up. But the Yaqui cut his eyes at Wayne Morgan once. For an instant, Hawk was not sleepy-looking. And Morgan got the signal—"Stay out of it. Keep away." Instantly Morgan realized that Blue Hawk was right.

Morgan was shoved back by one of the house guards. He saw the Indian let the serape wrapped around his shoulders drop open.

"I carry no guns, mister," Blue Hawk said.

"He had a hot-smokin' one in his hand yesterday," insisted the head houseman, preening his mustache with a white-skinned finger.

"Sure, he's smart," agreed the lanky man. "He had a gun when he ran from Tanson's body, all right! I'll swear it!"

Macklin yanked out one of his own guns, nodded to the deputy with him who stepped in and frisked the impassive Yaqui for a hidden weapon outside the knife in plain sight in the beaded sheath hung from his belt. With his left hand, the lawman hauled a pair of handcuffs from a coat pocket.

Blue Hawk merely stared straight ahead inscrutably as the steel bracelets were snapped on.

"Have to hold you for trial, I reckon, Injun," Macklin said. "Come on." Hawk was marched out.

"You know," an onlooker said, "that slick Injun could be one of that Scourge's outfit. They're killers, too."

Morgan's mouth tightened as he wheeled back to the bar. An idea like that could travel like a grass fire, and as dangerously, in a pueblo like Cuidado Hill was now. He swept the place slowly with his eyes, seeking Rita as the Mex band gulped some beer. She was nowhere to be seen. A couple of minutes later he just sort of strayed out a side door, climbed aboard the hammerhead roan that was Morgan's distinctive mount when he was in the cowboy rôle as the alter ego of the Masked Rider, and headed back for the camp. He had to take steps that night!

When he reached the camp he found Big Ralph awake, muttering about grub, but with a vacant look in his eyes. Morgan heated up some of the meat broth the Yaqui had made. The critically wounded man spooned it up greedily, drank the last few drops from the pan, then fell back on the cot. When Morgan asked him again who had captured him, he just stared.

"I don't remember. I don't remember nothing. I don't—" And again he dozed off like an animal.

OUTSIDE, Morgan brought some garments from his saddle roll, shifted clothes quickly. Then he sat down against the stump to wait. That was the hardest part. But it would be senseless for him to make his play until the town was practically closed down. Finally he pinched out another quirly and went over to put the rig on the big black stallion, Midnight, this time. A few more moments and he was astride the black, swinging toward Cuidado Hill.

Now, though, he was garbed completely in black, even to his sombrero, with a long black ankle-length cloak, wrapped around him. A black domino mask covered the upper half of his face, giving him a sinister, satanic look. He resembled a great bird of prey poised to swoop, to strike. The Masked Rider was riding once more!

At the edge of town the Masked Rider had to wait some more. Some of the whisky mills and honky-tonks were still in full swing.

Finally things began to quiet down. Singing drunks reeled down the street, homeward bound. Riders came up the side road past him, some sagging over their saddle-horns.

He left the road to quarter around the fringe of town, down near the river, then arcing back up to cross a side road. At last, afoot and leading the stallion, he got into a cluster of cottonwoods at the back of the jail yard. He darted out alone to a side wall of the dobe building, edged toward the glow of a lamp that came through a side window in the front office.

Macklin's heavy voice reached him as the front door opened.

"All right, George. Town's about closed up now. You can lock up." And the sheriff headed up the street toward his home.

The Masked Rider edged up over the window sill. The drawn shade was two inches short of the bottom of the barred window. He could see the front of the sheriff's roll-top desk facing that wall. Then George, the jailer, bald as an egg, stoop-shouldered, came around to that side of the desk, pulled out a drawer.

The Masked Rider saw him start to lift out a bottle of redeye. Like a flash, taking a chance, the masked man darted across the front yard, hopped up onto the little stoop, and struck the door sharply twice.

"Who's there?" George honked nasally

from inside. "Jail's locked up for the night. Cain't nobody get in now er—"

"It ain't the Angel Gabriel, you danged idjit!" the Masked Rider cut in with a muffled voice, though it was the gruff bass he assumed in that rôle and not the usual tones of Wayne Morgan. "The sheriff forgot that bottle he left in his desk and he ain't got a nip at home. He sent me back for it, George! Come on—get alive!"

As he figured, thrown off by the fact that he had been about to take a nip from the bottle itself, the jailer overlooked the fact that the caller still hadn't told him who he was. Boots squeaked inside the thick door. The bar on the inside was slid back with a *clunk-k*, the door started to open a couple of feet.

"Here!" George was shoving the bottle through the gap. "Say, who *are*—"

The Masked Rider had bent his head quickly to hide the mask as he saw the door start to open. The next moment his right hand snaked from under the black cloak. George, the jailer, choked off halfway in his question because the business end of a Colt .45 was jammed snugly one inch above his navel. He backed up automatically, gasping in fear and surprise as the visitor lifted his masked face to view and pushed forward. The masked man kicked the door shut behind him, turned half sideways to shove the bar back across it.

The Masked Rider worked with swift efficiency, jerking the bottle from George's palsied hands and setting it on the desk. On the corner of the desk was the jailer's big iron ring with the cell keys. The Masked Rider practically flung them at the trembling George.

"Come on, George! We're going upstairs to see a prisoner friend of mine, the Indian! Get your lantern. And try any tricks and you'll be shaking hands with the angels before you can spit!"

George wobbled his head up and down

What Readers Write About MASKED RIDER WESTERN

Excerpts from some recent letters

●

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I would like to tell you how much I enjoy MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I have read it for a long time. It has more entertainment than any other Western magazine. Keep up the good work. Have more stories like "Trail of the Shoshones," please.

—Jim S. West, Greenville, O.

Dear Editor:

I claim to be one of the oldest readers of Western stories. In the early '90s I purchased for five cents small magazines about the size of today's comics. At present I prefer the Thrilling Publications, and believe the authors are superior to other Western story writers. In 1949 my wife and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

—Hugh B. Reed, Lansing, Mich.

to show he savvied, picked up the lantern standing in the corner. He turned up the lighted wick, led the way back into the little hall, then up the narrow stairs that led to the cells. All four of them were open-fronted, with no solid wall, and just big bars forming the front side. Against the bars on the left, as motionless as something frozen, stood the Yaqui, serape pulled about him.

"Hola, Senor," he said softly. *"Gracias a Dios!"*

"Let him out, George," the Masked Rider ordered.

CHAPTER V

Two Rescues From the Law

GEORGE twisted the heavy key in the cell door lock. Then Hawk was stepping out, freed.

"You have my knife?" he asked George, pointing at his empty beaded sheathe.

That knife was the Yaqui's most prized possession, the most dependable weapon he carried. When the jailer nodded, the Sphinx-faced Hawk almost grinned. Then he pointed at the next cell, at the figure stretched on the bunk by the wall.

"Mike Scane, senor, that is him in there," Blue Hawk said. "I think it would be good if we took him along. *Si*, Senor?"

The Masked Rider got his idea right away. He ordered the jailor to open up that cell also as Blue Hawk called to the cousin of the Miles Scane who had been slain by the Scourge's bunch, to wake him. Scane approached the open cell door rubbing his eyes, a stocky man with a shock of wiry-wild black hair, shoulders pulled down from heavy field work.

"Say, Injun," he began, "what is—" Then he sighted the sinister-looking Masked Rider, froze in his tracks, his faded eyes bulging. "The Masked Rider," he got out in a suddenly dried-up voice. "I heard of you, all right. You—you're a wanted man!"

The Masked Rider had encountered that reaction all too many times, since he did have a price on his head—because of the misdeeds and crimes of others who had too often posed as the Masked Rider. Scane started to back into the cell, shaking his head.

"You'll get out here and come along peaceable, pronto, Scane," the Masked Rider said in that gruff bass, "or you'll get this gun barrel bent over your skull! Get moving!"

Scane moved out reluctantly, eyes never leaving the black-garbed figure.

Downstairs George, the jailor, produced Blue Hawk's knife from a closet in the corner. The Masked Rider nodded to the Yaqui. No words were required between them. Reaching past the still scared and bewildered jailor, Hawk snatched a pair of handcuffs from the closet shelf. The next moment he had George's hands manacled behind him. When they were ready to leave, the Yaqui had the jailor propped in a corner, legs lashed by his own belt, and his own neckerchief strapped over his mouth as a gag.

"My horse is around back," the Masked Rider said as he lifted the bar and pulled open the thick door. "We'll—"

Blue Hawk and Mike Scane had just hit the steps in the moonlight when the Masked Rider sighted two figures on the other side of the street, down a short distance from the Bonanza. One was the stocky limping fellow in the gold-embroidered green bolero who had been throwing around his *dinero* in the honky-tonk earlier. He was looking toward the jail, and evidently had recognized the Yaqui under the moon. A gun seemed to spring into his hand by some legerdemain. The next instant, a slug was cracking into the 'dobe front of the jail at head height.

From the doorway the Masked Rider answered with the crashing report of his big .45. His first slug gashed splinters from a hitch-rail just in front of Green Bolero. The man and his companion jumped back behind the cover of the steps that ran up to a store porch. The Masked Rider sent a chunk of lead gouging into

BLUE HAWK

the steps, then slammed the jail door, making a swift change in his plans as he leaped back into the jail office.

Sliding the bar into place to lock it, he glided past the bound jailor and down the hall to the rear. The back door was heavy, too, with a strongly barred window up at the top, and locked. But the key was on the inside. When he got out in the night, the Masked Rider locked the door from the outside, then tossed the heavy key out into the weeds.

Back amidst the cottonwoods, Blue Hawk was waiting with Mike Scane whom the Yaqui held firmly by an arm.

"Follow me!" the Masked Rider ordered as he swung aboard Midnight.

Up the slope, past back yards, parallel to the main street he led the way, the other two trotting behind. He awaited the sound of pounding on the jailhouse door, a bellow of warning. But nothing happened.

"What's the matter?" a man cried as they passed.

"Aw, just an orey-eyed cow nurse trying to shoot down the stars," somebody answered the query out in the road.

Across the street from the Bonanza, the Masked Rider pushed up an alley. The place seemed closed up, the big double front doors locked.

"Your cayuse is over there at the rail, Hawk, so you and Scane ride double and I'll cover the—" Morgan was just saying when there was a burst of shots from inside the dance hall and gambling hell.

ONE of the doors was whipped open. Four men came running down the steps, one of them carrying a small sack. They hustled downhill, to vanish among the thick shadows of the wooden awning of a store. And moments after they reached it, they spurred out into the road on ponies that had been hidden, high-tailing down toward the bridge over the river.

Morgan glimpsed the yellow neckerchief one of the men wore. He smelled a holdup. But his first duty was to get Blue Hawk and Mike Scane into the clear.

"Hit for the camp!" he told the Yaqui.

In a matter of moments the pair was across the road and mounted, the Yaqui riding behind. They had just rounded the corner when Sheriff Joe Macklin came hustling down the sidewalk and turned into the Bonanza. Some hunch made the Masked Rider slip across the road to get the lowdown instead of taking off after the men who had fled down the line. Some late revelers bunched in the doorway.

"Hey, what happened?" asked a man coming up the walk as the revelers, ordered out by the booming-voiced lawman, came back down the steps.

"Holdup!" one of them answered. "They'd locked up and was counting the day's receipts when four gunslingers walked in an'—"

"How in tarnation did they walk in if the door was locked?"

"That's why Macklin is arresting Rita Lassell," the man on the steps told him. "Ralston, the head houseman, he says he saw her slip down to the door and shove back the bolt. That was just before the hold-up men came in!"

Then the Masked Rider heard Joe Macklin's heavy voice as one of the doors opened again.

"You deny the charge, Miss Rita?"

She stepped into sight, a shawl gathered over her high-held head, and shoulders. There was a proud, cold look on her face.

"I have nothing to say now, Sheriff."

The deputy moved around to the other side of her.

The trio came down the steps and turned down toward the jail, crossing the road diagonally, Macklin grasping the girl's arm.

The Masked Rider tried to weigh the thing, wondering if Rita had been working with the holdup bunch who most probably were some of the Scourge's outfit. He was wondering too what connection the stocky man with the limp, Green Bolero, might have with the whole matter. He drifted back across the street behind the two lawmen and their prisoner.

Swiftly, abruptly, a crouched figure darted out from beside the barbershop His gun spurted a jagged red-yellow dagger of muzzle flame. The deputy walking beside the prisoner twisted half around and went down, grabbing at a bullet-torn leg. Shucking out his hogleg, big Macklin started to wheel. Other figures materialized out of the darkness, like characters in a well-rehearsed play. One, across the road, was joined by another a few feet away. Still another edged up from behind a horse trough down the line ahead of the lawman and the girl. Another man came into view above a porch railing.

"Macklin, you're covered from every side," a flat, emotionless voice called from across the road.

Trying to locate him, his own guns out of leather now, the Masked Rider thought he caught the flash of silver on what might have been a green bolero.

"Chuck your pea-shooter into the road and hoist 'em, Macklin!" the toneless voice went on. "Or the little lady might get injured in the gun ruckus! You ain't got a chance, you damn badge packer! Hoist 'em!"

BEWILDERED, Macklin swiveled his head around frantically. A warning slug droned close over his head, a deliberate miss. He couldn't see the black-cloaked Masked Rider catfooting it down in the shadows close to the buildings. The black-clad man planned to jump a gun into the back of one of the snakes on this side, then use him as a human shield as he made a long-shot play.

And then, as he passed the inset doorway of the undertaking parlor, a man hidden there rammed a gun in his back. From behind, and in the night, he had failed to see the mask.

"Stand hitched, feller!" the Masked Rider's attacker warned.

Helpless himself now, the masked man saw Macklin toss his weapon into the gutter and half-lift his hands. Two men swooped on him and his prisoner. Rita darted sideward, then made a vain lunge for Macklin's other Colts in his left holster. But her arm was seized, twisted.

"Let me go!" she screamed, but one of them swung her up in his arms, ignoring her furious kicking.

Down past the jail, out of a lane, another of the pack came trotting with a bunch of ponies.

"All right, boys!" called the leader in that flat voice the Masked Rider knew he would never forget. "Let's bust the breeze!"

"*Adios,*" chuckled the man who had held him, and his gun barrel, from behind, chopped down on the side of the Masked Rider's head.

The knees of the black-clad avenger turned to sponges. His own weapons rattled on the wooden sidewalk as all the strength went out of him. He stumbled a few steps across the sidewalk, into the wan moonlight, then went down heavily on one side. There were a few seconds of blackness, then his senses cleared. But he was powerless to move temporarily.

He saw the man mounting, saw the girl being hoisted aboard a spare horse. It was maddening to lie there as helpless as a new-born dogie in a mud hole.

Then he saw Green Bolero himself coming toward him at a trot. The lobo boss had spotted him as he plunged across the walk after that gun-barrel blow. The outlaw leader's gun swung up level as he reined in less than five yards away.

The Masked Rider knew he as good as had one foot on hell's own doorstep, that his ticket to Boot Hill was about to be punched. His own Colts lay somewhere behind him. But just before the horseman's gun roared, the Masked Rider twisted to the right, over on his face. The outlaw's chunk of lead gashed the dirt where he had been lying. And the masked man, by sheer will power, yanked his almost powerless body back the other way as the man fired again. The slug punctured the outflung flap of the long black cloak.

There was a terrific blast. It was from a double-barreled shotgun in the hands of a man firing from a second-story window across the way. The charge whammed into the front of the undertaker's place, making splinters fly.

"Come on, Boss!" yelped one of the pack. And Green Bolero wheeled and spurred down the road.

Slowly regaining his strength as the fleeing men hammered across the bridge, the Masked Rider pushed himself to his knees.

"Come on!" Macklin yelled to the men up by the Bonanza. "We got to get up a posse pronto!"

"Why?" one of the men up there demanded. "Why should we take a chance on gettin' a bellyful of lead? She's gone bad, that girl has—gone outlaw!"

Macklin argued and pled with them as the Masked Rider reeled to his feet, then moved unsteadily down between the undertaker's and the place beside it. He moved again through back yards until he came to the alley where he had left Midnight across from the Bonanza. He led the stallion out through the back street.

Dragging himself into the kak, but with his strength returning, he quickly guided Midnight down behind the main street buildings, forded the stream down below the bridge. Then he took out after the man he was certain was Spider Vines, and his pack.

He intended to make no hare-brained attempt at a rescue. He was pretty sure Rita Lassell was on the square, remembering how she had resisted being snatched from the law by the outlaws. What he did mean to do was trail them, figuring they would head for their hideout.

Once on the open range, they rode at a hand lope under the glowing moon. He had to hang back a long way, almost completely out of sight of them. Once, following the road around a chimney butte, he was almost discovered. By a seep spring a few hundred yards on, they had halted. The Masked Rider lit out of that kak as if there was a fire in his pants, threw the black horse by main force into the brush at the base of the butte. He hit the ground flat himself. In a few minutes though, the riders pushed on.

The moon looked like a rusty hole in the grayish blanket that was the heavens. With a rising wind blowing from them toward him the Masked Rider dared to ride faster.

CHAPTER VI

Magic Fireplace

IN THE first dim grayness of the pre-dawn, from behind a rise, the Masked Rider watched the outlaw bunch swing eastward over a sandy basin. The wind obliterated their hoofprints in a matter of a couple of minutes. When they moved into a stand of timber beyond, he risked pushing into the basin.

His mind was working hard as he rode, seeking the reason for this latest episode. Then, in a blinding flash, one point hit him. Rita must have been driven to submission by some club held over her to work with them in that night's holdup! It might be something concerning her brother.

"The whole thing was staged, that holdup was an act," he muttered. Her rescue from the lawmen had been the final card, making her a wanted person, outlawed, more completely in the power of this Scourge than ever.

The light heightened as their course bent further to the south across the rolling prairie. The wind had dropped off completely as the tips of a few peaks off to the east took on a pinkish hue, portending the rise of the sun. Rounding the knoll the track led along fenceline. And at a gate, the masked man saw the brand-iron mark of the Loop L spread on a post. The Lassell outfit.

Forced to keep further behind in the new-born day, however, to be out of sight, his hopes fell as he crossed a small feeder creek and came to a fork in the trail. A quick examination showed that most of the band had taken the right fork, but three riders had pushed on up the left branch that followed the fenceline. The Masked Rider hesitated. Then, on a hunch, he also took the left fork.

Twenty minutes later he dismounted again and put an ear to the ground. He caught the dull clump that meant horse hoofs not far ahead. Riding on as the risen sun broke through the haze, he loosened his guns in their holsters beneath the black cloak. But within a few minutes the pinkish glow was wiped from the face of the earth as a big gray cloud bank slowly blotted out the sun. The atmosphere was hazy and grayish as he topped a short sharp rise. Ahead of him, off to the left, stood the sprawling adobe *hacienda*-type place that was the Loop L ranchhouse.

The windows were boarded up, the shrubs and weeds, gone wild, were fighting for choking supremacy in the yards. The low, whitewashed wall around the place had long since lost its pristine look, had gaps in spots where it had broken down. The iron grillwork arch over the gateway in the wall had fallen off its post support at one end. And three riders were guiding their ponies across that dropped end in single file.

The rider in front was a plain-garbed figure unknown to the Masked Rider. But the second one in line was Rita Lassell, her black hair tumbling down as she pulled away the bandanna she'd tied over it. The third horseman, his coat falling open, was the stocky man who wore the green bolero, the outlaw boss. Of that, the Masked Rider was dead sure.

Rita produced a key and opened the massive door of now-cracked mahogany planks. She and Green Bolero went inside, the door closing after them. The third rider led the ponies out of sight around the far end of the house.

The Masked Rider waited some time, reining in his impatience with difficulty. But the man did not reappear. He must have entered the house by some other door.

Now the masked man was glad of the hazy day, with millions of pinpoints of moisture hanging in the air. He had already snaked over a fallen-in part of the

adobe wall off from the nearer wing of the big *hacienda.* Crouched low, ears attuned to the slightest sound, he worked through the tangled undergrowth to one of the boarded-up windows. One of the rotting boards came away easily at the bottom. After he pried it up, he listened, then peered into a dim, deserted room, the dust-coated furniture giving it a ghostly look. He still caught no sound.

Shortly he was swinging inside over the sill after working free a couple of more boards. Gun cocked, he cat-footed it over to a door at the other side, worked the knob around carefully. He looked into a smaller room, deserted, too, save for a pack rat scampering into some debris in a corner. The big house gave up no other sound. When he stepped through the opposite door of the second room, he found himself in a narrow side hall. He advanced again, then stood rooted after a few yards when a plank groaned under his boot.

FROM somewhere ahead in the dimness, Rita's voice came, taut with tension, and in it a note of desperation. "You can't stay here in this place with me! That's final, Mr.—" The rest, the name, was lost in the scrape of a chair leg.

A man's voice, that flat emotionless voice the Rider knew so well, responded.

"Yeah? Maybe you forget you're a fugitive from justice! Don't be so high and mighty, girl! I saved you from jail."

"Why?" Rita Lassell threw back.

"Never mind! This place'd make a perfect—"

And the Masked Rider's boot struck a protruding nail head. He was sent stumbling against a wall with a thud. Talk up ahead broke off.

Then came Rita's hoarse whisper:

"Somebody's here! Somebody followed us!" She stopped short with a gasp as if a hand had been clamped over her mouth. Then silence.

The Rider took a gamble, rushing ahead on tiptoe. As he came within sight of the main hall, he saw the door a few

[*Turn page*]

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feet ahead on his right standing open. And his sharp eyes, accustomed to the tomblike dimness of the place now, picked out the footprints in the heavy dust leading from the main hall to that doorway. Flattened against the wall, sniffing the tobacco smoke in the air, he edged down to it. He started to peek around the door frame.

"All right—come in, whoever you are! And you're covered."

It was Rita herself, speaking up just as he picked her out standing by the end of a massive claw-legged table in the big living room. She held a pearl-handled .32 leveled on him. Her eyes glittered in the fitful light of a candle propped on a plate on the table. Its glow played over the massive fireplace, built of rough native rock, beyond the near end of the long table.

His own weapon up, the Masked Rider entered. A sweeping glance showed him she was alone. He could hardly believe it.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?" The gun in her hand was unwavering, but her voice had a slight quaver in it. She was taken aback by the appearance of this black-garbed menacing figure in the black mask.

"Where're your friends, ma'am, or whoever it was you were talking to?" he asked in the sonorous bass voice he always assumed in the rôle of the Masked Rider.

He strode in as if oblivious to the gun she held. As he looked at the interior of the fireplace, at the mantel as high as a man's shoulder, he subconsciously noted that it was strangely clean for an abandoned house.

"Answer me!" he said harshly to Rita. "You happen to be wanted by the Law. If I were forced to shoot you, I'd be cleared!"

Her mouth worked. "Who are you?" she repeated. "Wh-who—are you?"

She retreated as she spoke, going away from the table end backing toward the wall and a window there beyond the massive fireplace. The Masked Rider sidestepped, turning his side to the fireplace as he shifted to cut her off.

"Take it easy, ma'am," he said as he saw her eyes narrow with tension. "Tell me where he went and nothing'll happen to you."

A bullet whispered, "Death-th," past his ear a breath of time before the report reached him. He realized it came from the fireplace. He whirled in time to see the man in the green bolero standing in the back of it like something out of a nightmare. Then he saw the other man—too late. The fellow's gun-barrel smashed him on the side of the head just as he got his own Colts around. The weapon bucked in his hand as he triggered. He was aware of the man staggering back as he clutched at the table himself.

As he started to sink, he heard Rita scream once. Everything was swimming before his eyes. He sent another slug in the direction of the fireplace, then hurtled toward the door. He had never got round heels from side-stepping trouble, but now he couldn't see clearly, knew he couldn't shoot accurately. All he wanted to do was to get out.

He got through the doorway, firing. Flight was the only thing left to him. And they were afraid of his weapons. They stayed back.

He got into the side hall, back through those rooms, stumbling. A couple of slugs slammed into the walls around him. Once he got a glimpse of the man in the green bolero like something out of a wild dream. Then he slammed a door in the man's face and got through that window he had used to break in. The outer air seemed to clear his brain, to steady him.

THE Masked Rider got back through the gap in the wall, down to the bunkhouse behind which he had left the big black stallion. The lump on the side of his head hurt furiously, but he was in command of his faculties and able to move swiftly to do what must be done.

A couple of minutes later, just as he was completing a quick change, he heard footsteps approaching. He stepped out

into the night. It was the girl who was walking toward him, gun leveled again. When she saw him, she lowered it.

"Wayne Morgan!" she cried.

It *was* the drifting cowboy she knew who stepped out in his gray trousers and hickory shirt, and of course maskless. She was amazed.

"I was ridin' by, ma'am," he said, "and I heard some gunshots. I was sort of wonderin' what was goin' on."

She looked discomfited. "Why nothing, nothing really. There was an orey-eyed cowhand here whom I drove out and —and—"

He gestured toward the shattered boards of the window he himself had broken.

"Somebody seems to have got in that way, Miss Rita. I'll just take a look-see, if you don't mind." He moved toward the window.

He was sure of himself now. He had to find those men who had reappeared so mysteriously out of nowhere in that room. He got back into the house, tiptoed through those rooms again, down the side corridor. The place was as still as a tomb; the house seemed to be holding its breath. In the main hall he stood with a gun cocked, studying the scene.

Across the foot of the stairs that ran up along one wall was a big frieze of spider web running from the newel post to the frame of a door there. The web was a couple of feet in height, unbroken. So nobody had gone up those stairs, obviously. He eyed the heavy layer of dust coating the floor. The only boot prints, two pair of them, led from the front door and around to the side hall and into that room where he had found Rita. None led to any of the other doors in the main hall. None led to the rear of the house.

It was baffling, maddening. He went back into that room, knowing he would find nobody there. The only other tracks coming out were his own and, for a short distance, those of the two gunmen, Green Bolero and his companion who had pursued him. The boards at the windows had not been disturbed.

He relighted the candle, saw the blood on the floor from the slug he had put in the gun passer. And that was all.

He walked over near the big fireplace.

"They couldn't have disappeared into thin air," he muttered. Yet they seemed to have done just that.

Finally he left the house by the way he had entered, pausing on the outside long enough to press the boarding of the window back in place. Outside the wall, he looked down over the flat pasture lands back of the house. A barn, badly in need of repair, stood over to the north of the house, beyond the corral and down from the bunkhouse. They couldn't have made it either to the barn or the bunkhouse with his seeing them.

He built a tube of Durham and lighted up thoughtfully. Down beyond the hay flats ran a branch of Big Indian River. As he strode toward the rear of the place, on the alert, he could see that the creek was wide, running between high willow-flanked banks. At the rear of the place there was a horse shed, empty, and just one pony standing ground-anchored under a gaunt pine. One. The other two had gone. He could pick out the tracks easily down into the hay flats, hoofprints and the boot marks of a man who evidently had been leading the horses.

Any attempt at pursuit, at trailing them, would be an empty gesture, he realized. All they had to do was hit the river branch, then walk their ponies in the shallow water near the bank in either direction. No hoof prints are left in water.

He took the bridle of the horse Rita had been riding and led it through the gap in the wall and down to the bunkhouse where she stood waiting. She had a sullen twist to her mouth now. But it didn't fool Wayne Morgan. He knew that, actually, it was to cover fear.

"You *did* unbolt the door of the Bonanza for that holdup bunch, didn't you, Miss Rita?" he asked.

Her lips started to frame a "No." Then she closed them firmly, sensing she couldn't fool this tall, blue-eyed man who seemed to understand human nature so

well. He shrugged.

"Who were in the bunch who grabbed you away from the Law?" he demanded. "Why did they do it, Rita?"

Her lips quivered, then firmed again. "Wayne Morgan, don't torture me! I—I don't know!" She caught the hard impact of those striking blue eyes. "At least I can't tell you—I can't!" She was shaking now.

CHAPTER VII

A Little Taming—Western Style

WAYNE MORGAN knew Rita was battling terror. Forcing her now would only make her more adamant. He took her by one wrist.

"Look, Rita, you've got to tell me things if I'm going to help. I aim to run down that snake they call the Scourge to his hole and break him!"

"You never could do it. You have no idea what he—" She clamped her lips up.

"That's my affair," he said grimly. "Maybe he has no idea what he's bucking either. I—well, I have friends."

Her head swiveled around to look right, then left.

"There was a strange man in the house before, Wayne, a man all in black. With a black cape. And—he was masked. I sort of felt I knew him, yet— Do you know who he is?"

"Were you alone in there, Rita?" Morgan broke in. He couldn't ask who the two men in the room were without tacitly admitting he was the masked man himself. "Seems to me I spotted three ponies behind the house when I rode by."

"A couple of—friends, Wayne. They—left." She straightened and forced a smile. "Well, thank you very much. I've got to go back in now."

He swung her toward the horse by her shoulder. "You're going back into town, Rita Lassell," he said in a voice that whiplashed.

"Are you insane?" she cried, turning her white, strained face toward him fiercely. "Why the Law wants me! And—and—"

"And you're going in and turn yourself over to the Law! Get that through your stupid head!" He had her by both shoulders now, forcing her to face him squarely. "They'll come and get you! They'll find you, and this will be the first place Sheriff Macklin will head for, you little fool!"

"Let me go, please, Mr. Morgan," she said frigidly.

"Listen to me! Those men who grabbed you away from the Law are outlaws, and you know it! Stay here, and they've got you in their power. No, you'll be safer in jail. So you're coming in, Rita."

She tore away from him to run toward the house. He overtook her in a couple of leaping strides, swung her up in his powerful arms. She clawed at him, raking one cheek with a fingernail, kicking like a little devil the while. She tried to gouge one of his eyes.

Calmly he carried her back to an old bench beside the door of the shut-up bunkhouse, sat down, flipped her around face down over his knees. Then he proceeded to give her a paddling with one of his hard hands. And he really applied the pressure; they were no love taps. They were solid whacks that resounded on the morning, burning, stinging blows, a genuine old-fashioned spanking. She screamed in fury at first. The screams finally ceased. When he finally stood her on her feet, she was blubbering.

"There!" he said, brushing off his hands. "Reckon your dad was too easy and indulgent with a pretty girl like you. That's something you've needed for a long time. Now do you climb into that kak like a nice little lady, or do I have to repeat the treatment, ma'am?"

Head bowed she walked over and put a foot in the stirrup. As she swung up, she cut her eyes furtively at him. And there was a twinkle in them.

It was afternoon when they crossed the bridge over the Big Indian River and

rode into Cuidado Hill, halted at the bottom of the hill. Morgan didn't want to be spotted forking Midnight, the black stallion. He looked her full in the eyes.

"Remember, Rita, you gave me your word."

She nodded obediently. "Yes, Wayne."

"Jail won't be much—well, fun. But remember, it's no serious charge against you. Let any jury get one look at you, and with those green eyes of yours, plus the fact that you came in and gave yourself up, you'll be cleared and free. There'll be no question now, about you workin' with a lobo pack."

"Yes, Wayne."

"And in jail, Rita, you'll be safe till this thing is over."

"Yes-s, Wayne," she said.

When he put out his hand to pat her arm, she grabbed it in one of her gloved ones and pressed it hard. Then she rode on alone, swung on up to the jail, and dropped from the kak, Morgan following afoot. Several people on the wooden sidewalk turned to stare, recognizing her. It wasn't easy for the proud girl, as Morgan knew. He watched her chin go up. Then she walked unhurriedly up the path to the jail door, got there just as it opened.

HEAVY-BODIED Joe Macklin, the sheriff, stepped out, big hook of red nose preceding him. He was just jerking down his pinch-topped sombrero when he saw her, recognized her. He blinked as if she were a mirage.

"Sheriff," Morgan heard her say in a clear steady voice, "I've come in to give myself up."

Macklin stood goggling for whole seconds as if somebody had accused him of stealing chickens. Then he swung the door back open and stepped aside for her to enter.

"Go get my wife, Eb," he called to a deputy inside.

Morgan half raised his hat to sleeve sweat from his forehead. Then he went

[*Turn page*]

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back down the slope and quartered around the town toward his and Blue Hawk's secret camp. His eyes burned. And his belly seemed to be pressing against his backbone. He hadn't had any shuteye since the night before last. Nor any grub either.

When he came to where the cart track bowed around the stand of saplings beyond the town, he gave the cry of the mountain lion. It was a signal he and Blue Hawk used. After a moment, like an echo, the cry was repeated from the hidden camp. Morgan rode through the trees and he and the Yaqui gripped hands when he dismounted. Morgan asked about things.

"Nothing much, Senor. We saw a posse twice, once when they were going north past here, then when they came back. I heard them talking about Mike Scane and myself."

The Yaqui just shook his head when Morgan inquired about Big Ralph. The fugitive was asleep. He talked in spells but mentioned no names. His fever had abated a little more. But he often tossed in agony.

Morgan turned to the stump where the sullen-faced Mike Scane sat whittling in desultory fashion.

"Scane, why did you try to hold up the stage? I'm no lawman. I just want to find out who is behind all this trouble hereabouts."

"Tried to jump it because I needed *dinero,* gopher."

Morgan check-reined his temper. "Maybe somebody made you do it, eh, Scane?" At the other's shrug, Morgan continued, "Who were the two jaspers with you who got away, Scane?"

"Aw, shut up! I'm no rat who turns on his pards." His eyes twisted away. "Anyway, I didn't know 'em. Say, who was the big hombre in black with the mask that let me and the Injun out of jail, huh? You know?"

Turning away, Morgan said it was a friend, went over to get a tin plate of the grub the Yaqui was dishing up at the fire. After eating he lighted up a tube of Durham, weighing things. Blue Hawk watched him but was too sensitive of Morgan's mood to harry him with questions.

FINALLY Morgan rolled up in a blanket amidst the saplings. But he kept his eyes propped open for a few minutes before he slept. For the plan he had been evolving was beginning to take form in his mind.

Rita's case had given him a vague clue —the fact that she had gone bad, run afoul of the Law, in a small way. It was really a minor charge against her; there was no real evidence. But if she had remained a fugitive, she, the daughter of a cow king, would have ended up in disgrace. And then, Mike Scane, whose cousin Miles apparently had been slain. Only some terrific pressure exerted on him could have forced Mike, an honest man for years, to become a road agent. And now Mal Balban was missing.

"There's no open-and-shut proof his body *was* tossed into the creek," Morgan muttered. "I wonder what the next move there will be."

Just before he closed his eyes, he recalled that chat he had had with Tom Balban, the banker, near the Bonanza, about the seven witnesses to the killing of Ab Vines. A spark ignited in his brain. But it didn't quite flare into flame.

"Reckon I'll have a parley with the sheriff later," he thought, and he slept.

He dreamed of a huge fireplace. And men kept appearing in it as if by magic, as if sprouted from the hearth itself, like Green Bolero and his gun partner. Then the figures would fade as mysteriously as they had come.

Somebody was shaking him.

He opened his eyes and saw Blue Hawk bent over him. Beyond him the stars were faded pinheads in the sky, so he knew the night was old.

"Senor, come quick! Big Ralph, I believe his time has come." A prolonged choking cough from the cabin interrupted his words. "He is talking. And he knows what he is saying, Senor."

WAYNE MORGAN raced across the rough ground in his bare feet and into the cabin. The Yaqui already had a candle burning on a box near the bed. Big Ralph, sandy hair plastered over his forehead with sweat, had propped himself up on an elbow. He was so flushed his face was almost purple, the eyes burning at them. And his fever-puffed lips were as red as fresh-spilled blood. He looked at them without any recognition.

"I know I'm cashin' my chips," he said in a hoarse, low, but clear voice. There was no note of hysteria in it. "It—had to come sometime. I want you to drop a little letter to my brother, Tom, in Elk Bench, Oklahoma. Just—well, just say I'm sorry for the things I did. And that he can have my share of the horse ranch. That's all."

"What's Tom's last name, Ralph?" Morgan asked, pulling a pencil and a torn piece of paper from a shirt pocket.

"Just do me that one favor, write Tom," the dying man said, sagging down lower on his elbow. Morgan repeated his query, a little more loudly. "Just write Tom for me, please," Big Ralph said again. He didn't seem to hear. What was said to him didn't register.

The flush was fading from his face. Almost in a matter of moments it turned greenish-gray. He was going fast. Morgan spoke up close to his ear.

"Ralph, you know you're hitting the long, long trail. Hear me?" Morgan spoke clearly and slowly. "You had a score to settle with that snake who doublecrossed you. Remember?" Morgan's hopes leaped as the dying man twitched his head in a motion of assent. "All right. Now tell me who he was! If it's the gent I think, I'll settle your score for you. Who—is—he, Ralph?"

Big Ralph fell back flat, eyelids fluttering. His mouth worked. No sound came. He tried again.

"You'll—write—Tom, pl-please."

Any of Morgan's words that might have registered on his brain seemed to have been wiped away like chalk sponged from a slate. To his face came a strange, peaceful look as Morgan straightened up, sure he had been thwarted again.

"Senor, he is whispering something," Blue Hawk said quickly.

Morgan wheeled to bend close to the man's twitching lips again. Words in a feeble whisper struggled out of his throat, enigmatic, seemingly senseless words. Big Ralph's last speech in life was:

"Down in Redville, there is a grave that lies—" He died.

Morgan strode up and down before the ramshackle cabin, cudgeling his brain. The name of "Redville" made a bell tinkle faintly in his mind. But he couldn't quite pin down the significance of it, the connection. Yet he knew instinctively it was important. Actually, the remark seemed almost senseless, seemed to be a far cry from the Scourge and the trouble in the Cuidado country.

He was halfway through his second brain pill, exhaling smoke impatiently, when there was a sibilant warning sound from Blue Hawk. But Wayne Morgan had already caught it, the sound of two ponies coming down the trail from town.

Both men moved out of sight. The riders eased their ponies to a walk on the other side of the masking stand of saplings. Their voices carried clearly in the stillness of the rangeland night.

"Yep, Marty," one of them was saying, "I can remember my pop telling me to marry a plain woman 'cause she'd have more grit, make a more loyal wife. He claimed a pretty gal figured she didn't have to do nothing 'cause she was beautiful. She just went along on that alone."

"Sounds like sense, all right," the other rider agreed. "But that Miss Rita, she must be an exception to the rule. She's pretty as a spotted pony. And she had the grit to come back and give herself up— Well, we better be making some time."

Their horses moved on faster, at a hard lope.

But Morgan, chuckling with triumph, was paying no heed to the second man's final words anyway. The mention of Rita's name had done it. Now he knew

why that grave "that lies" at Redville could be, and might be important. For it had come back to him how, that first time he had encountered Rita. In her room, when she had been telling of the troubles here, she had mentioned that Spider Vines had died of the pox down in Redville and had been buried there.

"Let's get saddled up, Hawk," he said. "We're taking a little pasear down to Redville. Seems like they might have in interesting cemetery."

It was shortly before sundown of the next day when the trio—they had taken Scane along, giving him a cayuse from the cavvy—looked down upon Redville from the top of a long slope. It was barely more than a hump on the road, a small pueblo crouched a half-mile back from the Rio's banks. A few houses and cabins straggled off east and west from three stores and a tumbledown barroom.

Over to the west, beyond a string of cottonwoods running halfway up the hillside, Morgan picked out the town's Boot Hill. It was a little burial ground on the sandy slope, spiked with crosses and two or three headstones. The trees cut it off from sight of the town lower down on the grade.

CHAPTER VIII

The Undead

MORGAN eyed the setting sun, said they would squat where they were until the town went to sleep for the night. Blue Hawk said he would go on into town and see about getting shovels. Morgan and Mike Scane guided their ponies to a big tree off the road and dropped from saddle.

"You won't find nothin', Morgan," Mike Scane muttered, as he had done pretty consistently during their ride here.

"Exactly what I expect, but then I'll know," Morgan said, rolling a quirly, and walled in behind his own thoughts.

On the way down here he had got it out of Mike that he had been coerced into the attempt at the stage holdup. Scane knew that the two men who had ridden with him were outlaws. But he didn't seem to know just who they were. And he wouldn't tell what the threat was that made him go bad.

"Don't ask no more questions, Morgan," he had finally rasped out in an emotion-torn voice. "I can't tell you no more. A—a man's life depends on it."

Leaning against the tree trunk, Morgan smoked, checking over the facts he had discovered, knowing also that to the Scourge the Masked Rider was a marked man. The deeper he probed into this thing, the greater the danger for him. But if he found what he expected to find this night, he would be nearer a solution of the mystery.

A white-bearded man astride a burro came over the top of the hill, pulled up opposite them with a kindly, "Howdy, gents." His leathery face was wrinkle-ribbed. His piercing dark eyes took in everything, then shifted back to the dour wiry-haired Scane who had not joined in Morgan's return of the greeting.

"Say-y, got a match there, friend?" the old-timer said to Mike Scane, drawing out a corncob pipe. And when Mike shuffled over with one, the burro rider peered down at him, then cackled, "Say-y, I'd bet a twenty-dollar gold piece to a dobie buck your handle is Scane, feller!"

"Uh-huh," Mike said. "How'd you know?"

"'Cause you're the spittin' image of your pappy, Ed Scane. And I knew him right well. 'Member how that right knee of his was always stiff from an old bullet wound?"

The old-timer puffed out smoke and went on reminiscing, told how he remembered Mike as a stirrup-high younker. And about Miles, his orphaned cousin, who was brought up by Ed Scane with Mike.

"You two was just like blood brothers," he said.

Mike nodded, face dropping again. "Yes, we were."

" 'Member hearing of your pap's death, too. Right after that Crake trial when Crake was cleared of bushwhackin'. Your pap was one of the witnesses for him. Helped to clear Crake. Ab Vines was the dead 'un."

Over by the tree, Morgan became galvanized, ears alerted now.

"You lived up Cuidado way once?" Mike Scane asked.

The old man shook his head without answering the question in words.

"Got another match?" he asked. "This pipe ain't drawin' right. I don't know—"

Then, as Scane reached for another match, the old-timer jumped a Frontier model Colts from somewhere in his baggy clothes, levered the muzzle directly on Mike Scane.

"Your pop, Ed Scane, was a fine gent, feller," he ground out. "Straight. No danged snaky outrider like you! My pard come down from Cuidado Hill yesterday mornin'. So I know about you, Mike Scane, you polecat! You're a-riding with that feller they call the Scourge up there, dang you!"

Mike Scane stood goggle-eyed, mouth working, taken aback.

"Yep, I know," the man atop the burro went on. "You busted out of jail the other night—which is as good as admittin' your guilt—and you the son of a man as fine as Ed Scane!" He spat expressively. "Me, I don't give a hang 'bout the five hundred reward they got on your head. But I hate the entrails of any man'd ride with that dirty snake, that Scourge! Was I younger, I'd take his trail myself!" He was apoplectic with anger.

"I never rode with him," Scane got out drily.

"Humph! That's what they're saying in Cuidado Hill."

Mike Scane bent, apparently to retrieve the match he had dropped. Instead he came up with a handful of dust and snapped it full in the face of the man on the burro. As the old fellow rocked back, Scane leaped in and twisted the gun from his hand, then stood back to turn the weapon on his accuser.

Morgan, edging in, realized that Scane had gone berserk. The poor tortured devil, learning that he was now accused of being one of the Scourge's outfit, haunted by the thoughts of his family, was on the verge of going loco.

"You'll never take me in, damn you!" he cried. "And you ain't a-tellin' nobody what you know, you old buzzard!"

His thumb cocked back the hammer.

WAYNE MORGAN moved swiftly—and surprisingly. He sprang up behind the panting Scane, snaked an arm past him to knock down the gun hand, then brought the forearm up under the man's chin with a jolt to stun him. And haul him helplessly over balance in the bargain.

"Take her easy, Mike," Morgan said calmly. "You haven't killed anybody. We know that. Don't start now, you fool!"

[*Turn page*]

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After a moment, Mike Scane ceased to struggle, the old defeated look appearing again. "Get goin'—hit the trail, you old fool!" he ordered the man on the burro.

The old-timer sat there quietly, making no move to leave.

"You're one of that Scourge's riders too, eh?" he said to Morgan.

"I'm trying to cut that polecat's trail sign—not that it's any of your affair," Morgan came back.

"And who might you be, mister?"

"Name's Morgan."

The old-timer squinted, nodding. "Figured I'd peeled an eye on you before—few years back she was, I reckon. Wouldn't be Wayne Morgan, would it?" When Morgan nodded, the old fellow grinned. "Well, I know some about you. If you say Scane's hands are clean, it's good enough for me. Just 'cause I knew his pop, Ed, it sort of riled me his offspring should go bad, like they say."

"He's no member of the Scourge's outfit. Now—"

"Mind lettin' me have my hogleg back first?" the old-timer said. "'Tain't loaded, anyways." He took it as the now chagrined Mike Scane extended it. "Wish I could help you some in cuttin' down that cursed Scourge. Got my own score to settle with him. An old friend of mine got mixed up with him a few months back. While later this Tim was found dead with a slug in his back."

"That's too bad," Morgan said.

"Uh-huh. He owed me ten dollars, Tim did. I figured he knew somethin' that maybe this Scourge gent didn't want let out. Tim and me used to work together on that smugglin' setup up around Cuidado."

"Smugglin'?" Morgan asked. Now he might pick up something of value. It was always smart to let an hombre run off at the mouth.

"Sure. For Texas Jack Lassell." The burro rider chuckled as Morgan and Mike Scane cocked their eyebrows. "How'd you think he built up that spread of his, huh? After he got himself a real herd, he went straight."

He told about it reminiscently. Stuff was run over the Mexican border, he said, and moved north by pack-mule at night. On the last lap of the trip, they would put the stuff in flat boats on the Big Indian and pole it upstream by night and into the branch that ran up behind the Loop L hay flats. Lawmen, even the Federal officers, were on the watch but never nabbed them.

"How'd you get it from the creek to the house without being seen and trapped?" Morgan called to him offhandedly.

"Ran it right in plumb under their noses. Or maybe I should say under their damn boots. He-he. Well, got to get me my beans."

He waved to Mike and moved on down the slope aboard his burro.

Morgan frowned, head bent in thought. The old-timer had said that Mike's father had been one of the witnesses who had helped clear Crake in the killing of Ab Vines, Spider Vines' father.

"And Tom Balban, uncle of this Mal Balban who vanished just the other day, was another of those witnesses," Morgan said to himself.

Blue Hawk moved silently out from the stand of trees behind Morgan. The Yaqui was carrying two used shovels. He explained he had purchased them from a man on the outskirts of the town. By not going into the general store and buying new ones he had avoided attracting attention and rousing curiosity.

"The old one, he had quite a little story, didn't he, Senor?" he asked, his dark eyes fastened on the man he revered. And Wayne Morgan realized that the highly intelligent Indian had felt the same reaction he had. They said no more about it then, though.

They waited in the trees up there on the hills as the hours just seemed to seep away with aching sluggishness. A low-hung slice of moon finally silvered the Rio faintly. Down below, lights began to go out in the little town. Finally there was only the faint glow of illumination through the front windows of a whisky mill. Morgan heeled out squirly.

"All right, Hawk."

They mounted, rode slowly across the side of the hill without dropping down into town. At the end of the strip of cottonwoods, they ground-anchored their ponies.

"I want to find the grave of George—Spider—Vines," Morgan said, low-voiced. "He's said to be buried here."

THE hunt began, with Mike Scane showing his first interest in the matter. The three of them separated, worked up and down the ragged rows, between the mounds. Even in the clear moonlight, it was hard to decipher some of the faded names on the wooden crosses.

"Hey, here's a George—" Scane began. "Nope. George Hope. Shucks!"

Then the Yaqui whistled from the other side of the burial ground near a half-dead pepper tree. He had found the grave.

He and Morgan went to work with the shovels in the sandy soil. But shale and layers of clay made it tough work in spots. It was the Yaqui's shovel that thudded against the coffin first. Another few minutes and both of them jumped down into the oblong pit. It wasn't hard to pry open the coffin lid. Only a few nails held it down. Blue Hawk lifted it wider. From the lip of the grave above, Mike made a choking sound. There was no corpse!

"Nobody," Blue Hawk said. "You expected this, Senor, *si?*"

Morgan nodded, a smile twisting his lips. There was no body, much less that of Spider Vines. Just a number of sand-stuffed sacks to give it weight. Nothing— But there was something. Morgan saw it as the night breeze fluttered it away from one of the sandbags. It was a piece of brown paper with writing on it in a red pencil. Morgan seized it as it fluttered against the grave side, held it up in the weak moonlight to try to read it. The Yaqui lighted a match and cupped it in a brown hand near the paper.

The red-pencil writing was in printed letters, a boast and a vow. It went:

Those who aided and abetted in the murder of my father—they will pay. I will be avenged on each and every one of them. And if death has robbed me of my chance of vengeance on them in person, I will get my retribution on their descendants. I will not kill. It will be a worse kind of revenge, far worse. It will be a living death, shame and disgrace. And I will be safe myself. For no one hunts a man supposed to be dead.

Before the Almighty and Satan himself, I swear this:

MY FATHER WILL BE AVENGED!

That last sentence was printed in capital letters. There was no signature, but at the bottom there was a red blotch. It had not been made by the red pencil, either. It was a thumb print, the print of a thumb that had been wet with blood.

Morgan clambered out of the grave, folding up the paper and putting it in a pocket. The Yaqui followed, picking up a shovel to begin the refilling of the grave.

"Well, Senor?" he said, before beginning.

"Yeah, what does this mean, Morgan?" Mike Scane added.

Wayne Morgan stood staring northward into the night, eyes narrowed. He realized that the man who had written that challenge had a twisted mind, a brain crazed with the lust for blind vengeance. The writer was plainly insane.

"It means," Morgan said softly, "that the Scourge of the Cuidado country is Spider Vines, and that he's alive."

En route back to Cuidado Hill, Morgan pushed hard, pacing impatiently whenever they halted for a breather, gulping his food when they stopped for grub. He resented any time lost in sleep though it was necessary. He seemed eaten by a driving raging urge to get back to the country being terrorized by the Scourge, Spider Vines. His plan was perfected now. He needed just one more piece of information to put it into operation.

Blue Hawk came up to him when they had halted once by a feeder creek early the next night.

"Senor, now we know who it is. But we do not know yet where his hideout is. What is the next move?"

Morgan tossed his half-smoked tube of Durham into the water.

"Mike Scane's father was a witness at

the trial of Crake for the murder of Ab Vines, this Spider's father. Miles, Mike's cousin and like a brother to him, was whisked away. And Mike was coerced into the attempted holdup of a stage-coach, deserted by his companions to be captured. Tom Balban, the banker, was another of the witnesses, on his own say-so, who helped clear Crake. So Mal Balban, his nephew, is killed—apparently. Actually I think he's alive. And now the pressure will be put on Tom Balban. Yes-s. Let's get ridin' again."

As he mounted, Wayne Morgan added a little more.

"And I'd wager my Midnight horse against a sway-backed crowbait that Texas Jack Lassell, Rita's father, was one of those witnesses in the case, too!"

"I have thought of that, Senor," the Yaqui said, running a hand over his long straight black hair with the red band around it.

"You mean," Mike Scane put in, "that all this trouble, these strange disappearances, it all goes back to the killin' of Spider Vines' father and that trial?" There was an almost eager hopeful note in his voice.

Morgan nodded. "I aim to have a little talk with the sheriff. And I've got to warn Tom Balban, too."

CHAPTER IX

Fixed Bank Robbery

DAWN'S first gray flush was a dirty band on the eastern horizon when the three riders pushed their jaded ponies back into Cuidado Hill. The stores were shuttered, the streets deserted, not even a single light in any whisky mill. The three dropped off under the heavy shadow of a tree just downslope from the corner of the side street leading down to Banker Balban's house.

"Decided maybe I ought to pass the word, sort of a warnin', to Tom Balban first—" Morgan repeated, then halted, catching the spur tinkle.

Blue Hawk's fingers locked on Mike's hand with which he was going to scratch a match for his fresh-built quirly.

A match was scratched across the way on the side road near the corner. A man in a black frock coat was studying a thick watch he had drawn from his pocket. The match wavered in his trembling hand. And the glow of it revealed the spade beard and bent head of Banker Tom Balban himself. He blew out the match, then turned the corner and headed up the street. The sound of his footsteps was faint because he walked on the dirt beside the board sidewalk, stealthily. Morgan led the way after him.

Balban flashed a glance around as he neared the impressive white pillars of the bank front. Beyond him, a few doors past the bank, was a dimly seen clump of ponies at the hitch-rail of the dry goods store.

The banker's key scraped in the lock of one of the big heavy doors. It wheeled inward. Balban passed through, not closing it after him. There was a low whistle on the night, and in the grayish light figures came from an alley across the road from beyond the dry goods store. The men passed up the steps and into the bank like some ghostly troupe, guns gleaming.

"By grab, a bank robbery!" Mike whispered, advancing. Morgan threw up an arm to halt him.

The last man stopped by one of those white pillars, the lookout.

"We'll hit 'em when they come out," Morgan said softly. "Mike—in that doorway there. I'm going to try to get across the road." He didn't have to tell Blue Hawk anything. "No move till my first shot. I—"

He broke off, bending his head, pinching his eyes shut. For a sudden gust of wind, accompanying the birth of the new day, had come dancing down the road to whip up a strangling cloud of dust. Down by the river tree-tops thrashed. Another gust came boiling down the line, loaded with alkali. A flash storm was in the making.

Morgan, ever an opportunist, whipped across the road under cover of it. He darted into the darkness of the wooden awning of a store there.

He didn't have long to wait. Two men, guns ready, emerged from the bank in the rising light.

"Quiet as a grave," the lookout said.

Two more of the band appeared, etched in the glow of a low-turned lamp inside the bank. They were not carrying drawn guns. Instead, bags of currency were stacked in their arms right up to their chins. The rest of them came barging out on the half-run. The last man looked back, then started to pull the door closed.

Morgan realized that big Tom Balban hadn't reappeared. Something told Morgan he wouldn't, either.

He took careful aim. He was almost directly across the road from the bank, at a slight angle. The big Colt .45 in his right hand crackled, stabbing the night with its livid muzzle flash. There was a howl. One of the looters carrying a load of the currency sacks staggered backward, hit high in the shoulder. The bags spilled from his arms.

Then all hell upended.

Mike Scane's weapon blasted away from that doorway in which he stood half hidden. Two of the men coming down the bank steps had started to trigger blindly in the direction from which that first shot had come. Scane got one of them in the arm, knocking the weapon from his hand. A man bawled orders from the bank steps, telling them to fan out.

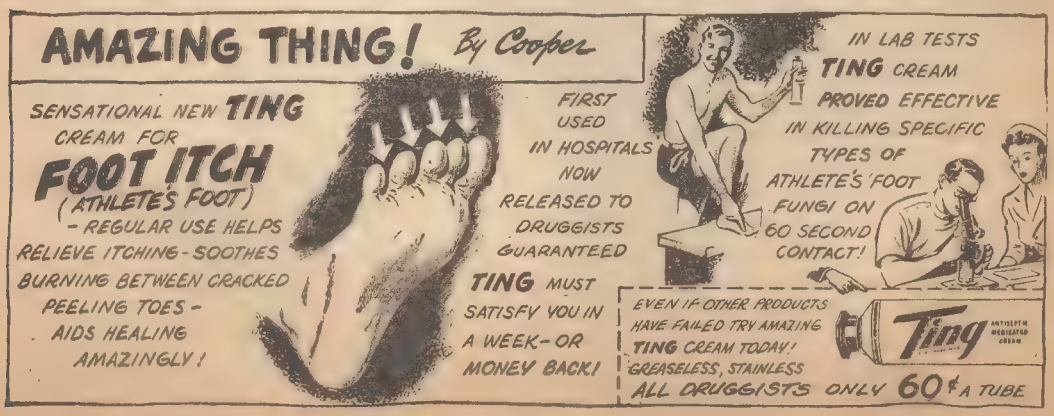
Lead poured into the heavy shadows under the wooden store awning all around Wayne Morgan. He shifted over a few steps as three men started to swing across the road toward him. That time he cut loose with his left-hand gun. One of the robbers dropped to his knees, hit high in the leg. One of his companions helped him up and the three of them retreated hurriedly.

A slug nicked Morgan's hat brim. It came from a gunman crouched behind a watering trough across the way. Morgan's first shot at him sent splinters flying from the lip of the trough. The second nicked him in the head and he ceased firing.

BUT, so busy had he been with the frontal attack, Morgan had missed the pair slipping down the sidewalk across the road, hugging the shadows. Down in the doorway, Scane was reloading. The two got past him, crouched beside the bank, as a pinkish glow began to spread from the east. Morgan could be seen, though dimly, now. The first of the duo pulled up to take aim.

A figure leaped silently from beside the corner of the little log-pole place, jumped smack in front of the first gunman. A gleaming blade flashed, then was lost from sight in the man's chest. His gun went off as he sank, speeding a slug at the sky. The other gunslick yelped and headed back for the bank after sending a wild shot over Blue Hawk's head. Tough

[Turn page]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trigger slammers who would face a storm of lead were often terrified by the idea of knife play.

Morgan slammed more lead at them, swung over behind a tree stump momentarily, dropping to a knee. Scane was triggering from that doorway. Over at the bank, the outlaw leader was again shouting orders. Men headed for the horses just up the street at the dead run. This surprise attack had them well on the way to stampeding. More than that, men were beginning to pop out of doorways, hurriedly hauling pants up over nightshirts, ready with six-guns and shotguns. The bank robbers had to make tracks.

"Hit the leather!" the outlaw boss yelled.

Morgan spotted a man carrying money bags as he ran toward the ponies along the side of the road. Leveling a weapon over the stump, elbow propped on it for dead-sure aim, Morgan fired. The slug drilled through the running man's hat crown. A second bullet jabbed up a spurt of dust right beside him. The result was instantaneous. He simply dropped the currency sacks into the dust, leaped, clawing for his saddle-horn, and flung himself into the kak. His life was worth more than *dinero* to him.

Wayne Morgan crouched again as he hurriedly started to thumb shells into one of his hot weapons. Both had gone empty. He had three cartridges in the chambers when he saw a stocky man moving quickly down the sloping road toward him. The fellow was in dark clothes, with his flat-brimmed black hat dragged low over his face. But somehow Morgan knew it was the leader, Green Bolero, the Spider Vines who was supposed to be dead.

Morgan drifted out into the middle of the road himself, almost eagerly. A man-to-man gun duel might settle the whole thing here and now. Another cloud of dust came billowing down the road ahead of one of the sporadic bursts of wind. It enveloped the whole scene for seconds, wiping Morgan's target from his sight, blinding Morgan himself. He had just got his eyes cleared with the knuckles of one hand when hot lead blasted at him. The dust wave had passed over Vines before it had cleared away from Morgan.

Wayne Morgan flung himself sideward, to his left, then zigzagged forward to send one slug at Vines. It drilled his trouser leg but failed to get flesh. One of Vines' slugs nicked Morgan in the cheek, drawing blood. Morgan was just triggering and it caused him to shoot wide. He charged forward recklessly, yelling:

"All right, Spider Vines, this is the showdown!"

Vines ceased to limp forward, stopping short, stunned by the fact that he had been recognized, was known. And at that instant, from an alley on the other side of the road from the bank, two townsmen began to cut loose at the mounted outlaws. One of them roared to Vines to hustle.

"We'll be trapped, Boss!"

Vines whirled, to fling himself toward the shortening shadows on the bank side of the street.

Morgan hauled up and took careful aim. Then another billow of dust danced and twisted along the road to blot out everything for a few moments and save Spider Vines' hide. By the time it had passed on, Vines had made it up to the horses. Another couple of seconds and the robbers were high-tailing it out of town, going up the slope instead of down toward the river.

Bitterness lashed around inside Wayne Morgan like an angry serpent. He had been so close to grabbing the Scourge of the Cuidado country!

He wasted no time in useless recriminations though. Blue Hawk glided over to his side. Scane came running up the wooden sidewalk. Further up the slope, the fleeing outlaws were making a running fight of it as townsmen cut loose from the side of the road, from doorways and windows.

"Tom Balban never came out of the bank!" Morgan said huskily, blowing at the smoke from the muzzle of his right gun. "We've got to see."

He sleeved at the cut on his cheek as he led the way up the bank steps on the run, Blue Hawk and Mike Scane behind him.

"Close the door after you!" Morgan called as he hustled inside, blinking in the light of the lamp on a desk.

WHEN he got his eyes refocused, through the grille of the two tellers' cages straight ahead, he saw the open door of the big safe against the rear wall. Vaulting the railing, he rushed back there. Sprawled on the floor before the safe, moaning and stirring a little now, lay Banker Tom Balban. One look at the safe door, which had not been forced, and it was clear to Wayne Morgan. The elderly banker had been coerced by some threat held over him to open the vault. He would know the combination.

Bending over the half-unconscious man, Morgan was certain what that threat had been, too; positive now. He saw that the banker had not been wounded by a shot. There was a lump the size of half an egg on the side of his head over one ear. He had been gun-whipped.

"Knocked unconscious so he'd be found here, red-hand-guilty, ruined for life," Morgan said low-voiced, as the first drops of rain pattered down outside. That rain would wipe out trail sign, making pursuit of the outlaws useless. "We've got to get him out, Hawk. Come on!"

In moments Blue Hawk, with the banker in his powerful arms, was following Morgan down a side hall to the back door. After the Yaqui stepped out, Morgan locked and rebarred the door behind him. He just got back into the front of the bank as Sheriff Macklin, with a handful of armed citizens, barged in the front door. Despite the situation, Morgan chuckled a little. This was the second time he had thwarted the Scourge. The first was when he had persuaded Rita Lassell to surrender herself to the Law.

"What the devil's going on here?" boomed the lawman.

"Seems like there was a bank robbery, Sheriff."

"I'm no damned idjit, Morgan!" Macklin roared back, gazing at the open safe. "What're you doing here, anyway? How do I know you—"

"Would I be here if I was in on it?" Morgan asked coldly.

"Well-l, I reckon not." The sheriff came through the railing gate to inspect the safe. Then he dispatched a man to the banker's home to get Balban. "Any idea who it was, Morgan? Was you the one in the gunfight with 'em?"

Morgan nodded to both queries. "I'm right certain it was the Scourge. I was just slopin' back into town after a little pasear." From the corner of his eye he noted that Mike Scane had edged over into the shadows by the side wall, slouching against it with head half-lowered. Everybody was too excited to pay him any heed, anyway. "I saw them gents come out of here, so-o—"

Macklin studied the big safe some more. "She wasn't pried or dynamited. Don't see how—less'n they knew the combination. Hmmmm."

Then the man who had gone for Balban came hustling back in. He reported that the banker had been taken ill—some kind of a stroke or something. In trying to get out of bed he had fallen and hit his head on a chest of drawers.

"His nephew's wife said he was back in bed and couldn't hardly talk, Joe. He can't come out."

The lawman "hmmm-ed" some more, then ordered the bank entrance cleared of the curious. Morgan saw that Mike was drifting out with the throng, Blue Hawk at his side. When Macklin discovered there was no key in the front door, he did some more snorting. He turned to tell one of the townsmen to stand guard until the bank officially opened that day. Morgan took the opportunity to ease over to Blue Hawk.

"You and Mike head for the camp," he whispered. "Drop my roan off in front of the jail. See you later."

Then he swung back to big-beaked, blustering Macklin.

"Sheriff, I'd like to have a little talk

with you down in your office. I've some ideas about this Scourge."

"Gabbing ain't going to get that snake, but—"

Macklin turned down toward the jail in the drizzle of the waning daybreak storm. Inside the office, he dropped wearily into his swivel chair.

"Well, let's hear it."

"Sheriff, could I speak to Miss Rita first?"

Macklin shrugged. "Wouldn't have nothing against that, myself, Morgan. Only the little lady ain't here no more." He fired up a stogie.

"What?" Fear, like a knife, fear for her, bit into Morgan.

"Uh-huh. Tom Balban slapped a thousand dollars cash money on my desk yesterday morning as bail for her. And he gave his personal word he'd keep her at his home and produce her for trial when wanted." Macklin had taken it up with the town council and there were no dissenters. "I released her in Tom Balban's custody. Now about your idees about the Scourge, feller?"

MORGAN bestrode a straight-backed chair. "I've got to go back to the beginning—what I reckon is the beginning, Macklin. Years back there was a fatal gun duel here between a man named Ab Vines and a gambler named Crake. Vines got killed but before he died he left a sworn statement that he'd been drygulched." Macklin nodded as Morgan paused to fire up a quirly he had built. "At the trial there were seven witnesses who swore it was a square face-to-face gunfight. That cleared this Crake."

"Yep, that's the story, Morgan."

"All right. Macklin, I heard Tom Balban himself tell how he was one of them. Ed Scane, I happen to know, was another. Now who were the other five?"

Joe Macklin shook his head, half rising from his chair.

"My belly's yellin' murder," he growled. "Time I got home and got me some breakfast— Morgan, I don't know. I wasn't sheriff then. And though I was born and brought up here, I was away for about two years, working over in Lincoln Junction. Didn't get back here till some months after that Crake trial."

CHAPTER X

Who Were the Seven?

HOPE in Morgan sank like a stone in water. Banker Balban would know, of course. But he had a strong hunch that the scared Balban would do no talking, especially now. Of course, he could threaten him with the bank affair, his rôle in the robbery. But if he did he would incriminate himself for not reporting it to the Law, for aiding Balban in his getaway.

"Morgan," the badge packer said stiffly, standing now, "was I you, I'd quit snooping into this ruckus. 'Tain't none of your business nohow. And I don't mind admitting I'm a mite suspicious of you. You're a stranger here. I don't know nothin' about you, why you sloped in here, what your business is, nothing. So—"

Wayne Morgan was desperate. "Look, Sheriff. You should know which side I'm on, that I'm no outlaw, by what I did in the bank robbery tonight. They didn't get away with a cent. All the money sacks were found in the road and on the steps. Listen! Do you know anybody who could tell me who the seven witnesses were at the trial of that gambler Crake?"

Macklin shook his head as he picked up his sombrero.

"I can," a new voice said, and old George, the jailor, came clumping out of the back hallway. He was carrying a pot of java he had cooked on the stove in his room in the rear, and three tin cups. "Sure, I 'member that trial. I can name the seven!"

Impatient to get home to a hot breakfast, Macklin got a little short-tempered.

"Why don't you come back later in the day at a decent hour, Morgan?" he

snapped. "How there could be any connection between that gunning of Ab Vines years ago and this Scourge, damned if I can see! Ab's son, Spider Vines, is dead, so—"

"Sure, sure, Sheriff," Morgan said, not arguing. "You run along. I'll just parley with George for a few minutes. George, was Rita Lassell's dad, Texas Jack Lassell, one of those witnesses?"

Too curious to leave, Macklin sat back down as old George nodded vigorously while he poured coffee.

"Sure was," George said. "Him. And Ed Scane, Mike's pop. And Tom Balban. Them three and—and—" He coughed, catching at his throat with a skinny hand.

"And the other four?" Morgan asked eagerly.

George coughed again, shivered inside his sweater. "These cold mornings sure get into a man's bones. Ain't a young un no more." He cleared his throat, coughed again.

"Shucks, George, it ain't cold now," Macklin said.

"Maybe so, maybe not. But it's damp-like. My throat feels all dried up, and swollen. Can't hardly talk. It—it sort of hurts."

"All right," Macklin said. "Maybe we can all stand a snort of red-eye."

He produced a bottle from his desk drawer. When George brought out three glasses with surprising alacrity, Macklin poured three stiff snorts and they dumped them down. George closed his eyes a moment, smiling as he patted his stomach.

"The other four?" Morgan prompted impatiently.

"Well, there was Dinny Ens. Dead now two years. Poor and honest, but a good hombre."

"Any children—any relatives, George?"

"Just him and his son, a-livin' on that horse ranch. Jeb, the boy, he got killed in a railroad accident a few months after his pop died."

Ens. Mentally, Morgan struck that name off his list.

"Well-l"—George scratched an ear—"they was Jake Racker that used to own the General Merchandise Store till he gambled his *dinero* away. Had to clerk in it for the new owner. He was a witness for Crake, mister."

"What happened to him?" Morgan's eyes pinned George. "Any relatives?"

"No relatives, nothin'. Jake was a bachelor. And a little while back he must of gone loco. Lit out of town one night with the cash box from the store. Feller who seen him said they was two strangers with him."

Morgan drew hard on his smoke. It fitted the pattern. Another man forced into outlawry.

"Two more, George," he said.

George took his nose out of the coffee cup. "There was Burks. Bible Burks, they used to call him. Had the Bar B brand. He was just riding back into town the night of the shooting. Friend of his had been sick."

"George, is he dead or alive? Have any children?"

"Dead. Heart attack some years back. No children of his own, either. But his brother, Al, he was a cowman too, had two boys. Old Bible Burks, he'd do anything for Al even if he did like his forty-rod a heap. And Bible was as fond of them two boys as if they was his own. Why one time, I 'member—"

"George, you say Al was a cowman, too. *Was?*"

"Uh-huh. A few weeks back, Jim, the older boy, got back with supplies and found a note from his dad sayin' he was goin' away. Didn't give no reason. Didn't say where. Sure did somethin' strange to Jim. 'Bout ten days or so later, Jim sort of—well, went bad." He drank coffee.

MACKLIN put in his piece there. An outlaw pack had held up a gambling place up in Big Hat, he said. Jim Burks was with them and got captured. He was in jail there now.

"There's some as say he was slammed down by one of the bunch itself, Morgan. Jim, he won't say nothin'."

"The second son?" Morgan asked,

tensed up inside. Piece after piece was falling into place, dovetailing neatly, true to the pattern.

"Pete," said George. "Nice feller. Don't drink none. But he's got sand in his craw a-plenty. Why once I saw him—"

"Good man, that Pete," Macklin inserted. "Ridden on two of my posses and ain't scared of anything on two legs."

"Where is Pete now?" Morgan asked, fearing the reply.

Macklin said he had been away for a spell visiting friends in Gunstock County. He didn't know anything that had happened, yet. But his girl in Cuidado had received a letter from him yesterday.

"He's comin' home on the late afternoon stage today, Morgan. But cuss it, I can't see what this has to do with anything."

Morgan put his eyes on the jailer again. "That leaves one more witness of the seven." Mentally he had added the last piece to his plan to trap Spider Vines, knew how he meant to bait the trap. "One more, George."

"Uh-huh. Lemme see, now. Uh—Harry. Nope." He walked around in a circle. "Howie—uh—nope. Real nice feller, too. Used to play the fiddle at the dances. Now—er—Hal. Ungh. Uh—yes, Hugh. Hugh Desson."

"Alive or dead?"

"Alive, I guess. Must be nigh seventy-odd now. His wife died. And that same winter he busted his hip. He sold out and went to the city and went into the Old Men's Home. Yep. No young uns. Nobody but him."

Morgan rose, a smile, a tough, knowing smile, working on his mouth. One hand folded into a fist symbolically. He had the whole picture, the whole thing wrapped up now. The final hand was about to be played.

"What time does that afternoon stage get in, Sheriff? I'd like to meet Pete Burks."

"Why she's due at four. But she's usually half hour to an hour late." Macklin got a suspicious look. "Danged if I can see what the witnesses of an old closed case got to do with anything now."

But Morgan was already headed for the door. In passing, he slipped old George a five-spot.

"To keep the misery out of your bones, George."

At the edge of the saplings, out by the hidden camp, Wayne Morgan got no reply to the mountain-lion signal call he gave. And none when he repeated it. Wary, he dropped from saddle and worked through the saplings. Everything in the clearing where the cabin stood looked all right. But he waited, suspicious of a trap. Then a puff of breeze caused a piece of paper held down by a stone atop the stump, to flap. Morgan moved out and got it. It was from Blue Hawk. It read:

Senor—Forgive me but I want to investigate the river branch that runs behind the Loop L. The old one at Redville said they worked their smuggling boats up it and moved the goods in right under the eyes of the lawmen. I am curious and think I might discover something of importance. Blue Hawk.
P. S Scone wants to come with me.
B. H.

Morgan nodded unconsciously. Anything Hawk did was all right with him. Minutes later he was wrapped in a blanket in the sapling grove. And one thought kept drumming through his mind:

"I hope Pete Burks packs nerve, plenty of nerve!"

Because Wayne Morgan planned to use young Burks as bandit bait to trap the supposedly dead Spider Vines.

A little before four, aboard the hammerhead roan again but leading Midnight, the jet black stallion, Morgan was back in Cuidado Hill. And he almost missed Pete Burks, for the stage-coach from Lost Load for once had arrived a few minutes early. It was drawn up at the main corner, the passengers having already alighted.

Then Morgan spotted Sheriff Joe Macklin going down the sidewalk, arm hooked through that of a tall, straight-backed young man.

Morgan touched spurs to the rangy roan and dropped off at the jail hitchrail just as the pair turned up the path to the door. He reached the steps as Macklin

thrust open the door, saying:

"Go right in, Pete. This little parley won't take long— You here again, Morgan?" He snorted as he noticed the cowboy's presence. "Listen, I can't see you now. Later maybe I can talk to you."

"I'd like to meet Mr. Burks too," Wayne Morgan said as he calmly strode by the sheriff and inside. "Remember, Macklin, this town'd be peelin' the hide off you if those robbers had got away with that bank loot. I think I deserve some consideration."

"All right, all right." The lawman sighed, rubbing his huge nose sheepishly. "Pete, this is a gent called Wayne Morgan."

THE TWO shook hands. Morgan liked what he saw, a rangy-shouldered, slim young fellow with an oversized powerful hand. He had a flat-jawed face, good-looking in a manly way, and slate-hued eyes. The eyes met Morgan's gaze full and calmly, studying him as the two gripped hands. This was the breed of man, Morgan sensed, that wouldn't lose his head easily. Pete Burks turned to the lawman.

"Say, what's this all about?" he said, in a low-pitched quiet voice. "You got some charge against me, Joe? Don't tell me Jim's in any trouble, 'cause I couldn't believe it."

Macklin, obviously embarrassed because of the rôle he was going to have to play, pointed to a chair. He produced the bottle from the desk drawer once more.

"Reckon you better have a shot to— well, to help you take it, Pete." He poured three drinks. The trio emptied their glasses.

"It's bad news, Pete. About your dad and Jim, both."

The sheriff launched quickly into the story, wasting no words and mincing none, trying to get the distasteful chore over as quickly as possible.

When he finished, Morgan was watching young Pete Burks. It looked as if every ounce of blood had been drained from his face. Beads of unnatural sweat studded it. He sat bent forward, hands riveted, white-knuckled, to the overlapping edge of the sheriff's desk top. He shook his head slowly.

"No, no—Jim couldn't of done that! Never! He'd sooner have starved than go owlhoot. He— No, no! Jim in jail?" His voice caught.

"Nothin' much I could do, Pete." Macklin explained weakly. "I got me a strong feeling that this Scourge had a hand in the whole thing. But I ain't got a shred of evidence, one scrap of proof. Jim never come in to tell me about it till two days after your pop went off."

Pete Burks stood up, staring into the crown of his hat, hands clenched on the brim.

"Well," he finally said, "reckon only thing for me to do is to go out to the place, then push on up to Big Hat to see Jim— in jail."

Wayne Morgan stood up, too.

"Burks, I *know* it's the hombre they call the Scourge behind this. And I've got an idea about how something can be done about it. I'd like to have a little talk with you, because I can't work it without your help. Come on."

He strode over to the door as if taking it for granted that young Burks would follow. Burks did.

"See here, Morgan," the sheriff cried, "I'm the Law in these parts! You can't take it into your own hands. I ought to be consulted, then mebbe give you permission to take a hand!"

But Morgan was already outside the door, with Pete Burks on his heels. Pete was in a desperate state of mind, willing to listen to anybody with a scheme or a plan. More than that, there was something about the big rangy man with the striking blue eyes, the man who, although Pete Burks could not remotely guess that, was also the Masked River, and that something in him always inspired confidence.

Both men mounted, Morgan again leading Midnight, the giant black stallion. Down at the bridge over Big Indian River, out in the open where they could

spot anybody who approached within earshot, Morgan swung under a big cottonwood and reined in.

He led off bluntly as they sat their saddles facing each other, almost stirrup to stirrup.

"Pete," he said, "I'm dead certain this is the Scourge's handiwork again. It fits the pattern of other cases where men have disappeared here in the Cuidado country of late."

"You're hunting him, Morgan? You're in this game?"

"Yes, Pete, to the last hand, to the Devil's own jackpot. And that last hand is due soon—if I ain't loco myself. You'll be next on the Scourge's list, probably the last one."

"Me?"

"Sure. Look. I'm plumb convinced that it was the Scourge who kidnaped your pop, forcing him to write that note at gunpoint. Then, holding him hostage, he could send word to your brother, Jim. Under the threat of killing your pop, he could make Jim do anything he pleased. Like forcing him to ride with some of his lobos on that attempted or maybe fake holdup job up in Big Hat. They slugged him, left him on the scene to be captured. In short, made an outlaw of him! *Sabe?*"

Pete Burks tongued dry lips. "What's your plan, Morgan?"

"It'll take nerve, Pete, a heap of it. The Scourge's next move likely will be to force you outside the Law, make you a wanted man, your family name shamed and disgraced. Now, I want to trick him into takin' *you* prisoner, like he took your dad, Burks." He talked on rapidly, ending: "It's like askin' a man to stick his head in a noose. But if you want to get your dad free and save your brother, Pete, it's a chance."

Pete sleeved his forehead. "Let's get started at it," he said grimly.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

DEADLINE FOR SHEEP

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER XI

Lobo Trail

EARLY in the evening Wayne Morgan and Pete Burks, started their prowl, dropping around to the various whisky mills, visiting a couple of honky-tonks with bars. They did little drinking though young Burks put on an act of being half orey-eyed, talking loudly in a bragging, cocksure voice.

"Yes-siree, mister, I tell you I got the lowdown!" he'd snort. "Picked up this little piece of information on the way back here. I *know* who this Scourge is. Yep! Believe me! And this gent who passed me the information, he gave me a pretty good idee where he holes up, too!"

Once two men beside him butted in. "Pete, why in tarnation don't you tell the sheriff, if you really know?" one of them insisted.

"Sure," added the other, "Macklin'd give his left eye to know where he could trap that sidewinder in his hole, Pete!"

And Pete Burks, as Morgan had coached him to do, would wink wisely and shake his head.

"Got to wait a couple days, fellers. Hombre that tipped me off, he went on through with the stage. He made me promise not to give out what he told me till he got clear. Seems he used to ride with this Scourge once. Can't talk yet. But—I—know, gents!"

By the time they sauntered into the big Bonanza, the word had already got around town. Young Pete Burks had the lowdown on the Scourge.

"Say, Pete," the drink wrangler in the Bonanza asked as he set out a bottle and glasses, "is it true you know somethin' about this Scourge hombre?"

Pete gave him a smug little smile. "When I start to talk, feller, that Scourge snake'll as good as have his chips cashed then and there. Haw!"

Sharp-eyed Morgan saw Ralston, the head houseman who had pointed out Blue

Hawk as Tanson's killer, get up from a nearby table quickly and head for the rear. Morgan knew the warning would be sent to Vines.

The next day up in the trees of the small wooded slope where Wayne Morgan waited and watched, the smoky late afternoon was waning fast. The light was already dim. Below was a neat ranchhouse with a low adobe bunkhouse and a windmill spiking up behind it. This was the Bar B spread, owned by Al Burks, captive father of Jim and Pete. From Morgan's hidden position, his eyes swept over the swells of the range.

"They're sure to come tonight," he muttered once.

The night before he and Pete had spent at Morgan's hidden camp outside of Cuidado Hill. Blue Hawk and Mike Scane had not returned there then. At early dawn, Morgan and Pete Burks had sloped northward over the rangeland, veering east away from the Lost Hills to the west. And just before they had parted, in sight of the Bar B, Morgan had given his final instructions.

"When they come, fire once—to warn me, Pete. Then give yourself up like a broken-spirited man who don't give a hoot any more. *Sabe?*"

He was gambling on the idea it would be logical for Spider Vines to vary his routine this time. Vines would want to grab Pete, take him back to his hideout before he could spill what he knew, what he'd advertised in town he knew.

Evening came. Smoke rose from the kitchen chimney of the ranchhouse. And the vagrant breeze brought the aroma of boiled coffee to Morgan as he gnawed on jerked beef, washing it down with water from his canteen.

A gondola of lemon-hued moon climbed into the southern sky, sparkling the range. Morgan dozed in little catnaps. When he awoke, he would keep checking the prairie. He figured it was well after midnight as he finished smoking a quirly, and dozed again.

The report of a gun, muffled because it came from inside the house, stabbed the serenity of the night.

Morgan had a gun shucked out even as he came erect. He moved to an opening in the timber stand. On the ranchhouse porch he saw several men, one hammering on the door. Riders were at the steps. Three more were posted down in front of the bunkhouse, their leveled guns agleam in the moonlight.

One of them bawled harshly:

"Stay penned in there, you chunkheads, or you'll have lilies in your dewclaws 'fore you're one step out of the door!"

Then, from the house doorway, came Pete Burks' voice.

"What do you gents want?"

Morgan could just make him out, standing there in a white shirt, arms half-lifted.

He couldn't catch the answer of the men at the door. But one of the riders at the steps gestured impatiently.

"Drag him out, damn it!" he called, in the flat, emotionless voice Morgan now knew belonged to the outlaw leader, Spider Vines.

Up in the woods, Morgan's finger tightened on the trigger. But this was not the moment to strike. He was playing for the jackpot.

IN A COUPLE of moments, Pete Burks came down the ranchhouse steps, flanked by two men, with a third behind him holding a leveled gun ready. The moon's rays played on the yellow neckerchief of that third man. Morgan knew him.

It all went off swiftly. Hands lashed in front of him, Pete was hoisted into the saddle of a spare pony. The others swung out of the ranchyard, then paused to confab a few moments out on the trail. Yellow Neckerchief and two others turned away from the rest and rode eastward at a hand lope past the end of the timber stand where Morgan was hidden. Then the others, with the captive, spurred westward back down the trail, disappearing through the cut.

The trio out in front of the bunkhouse

door waited. There was the creak of hinges. The gun muzzle of one of the trio spurted red-yellow flame in the night. There was a scream from one of the bunkhouse hands. The three men wheeled their ponies, guffawing, and went off at a hard gallop to overtake the main bunch.

Blood roared in Morgan's ears as he flung the saddle on the roan, snapped snug the cinch strap; blood sent pounding by fury. There had been no need for that wounding of a man. Spider Vines' gun hands seemed to possess the ruthless brutality of the mentally twisted, vengeance-crazed Spider himself. Morgan swung up, took the bridle of the big black stallion, pushed to the end of the woodland, and dropped down onto the trail. Then he headed westward after the racing outlaws.

Ordinarily he might have tried a long-shot gamble by swinging around the band, getting ahead of them, then try to stampede them by a surprise ambush in some favorable spot, and effect Pete's rescue. But that was not his game this time.

It would be logical for Vines to take Pete Burks back to the hideout where he held the other hostages, Morgan was certain. And Morgan meant to trail them into it. Only in that way could he find the men who had been used as clubs—probably under the threat that they would be killed—over the heads of their relatives whom Spider Vines, one after the other, was driving into outlawry and disgrace.

"But once I get those poor devils away and safe," Wayne Morgan muttered as he rode, "the moment of settlement between Spider Vines and me will come. I'm ready to hang the deadwood on him now!"

A few hours later when stars were beginning to fade and the moon was growing wan, too, a chill predawn wind fingered the foliage of the trees. Wayne Morgan and that owlhoot pack traveling ahead of him were up in the Lost Hills country now.

After leaving the Bar B, they had followed the trail westward a few miles, then headed north along the bank of one of the many creeks of the well-watered Cuidado range. Some time later in the ebbing night, they had quitted the range to veer off northwest and into the broken rough country that bounded that side of the rich rangeland. Morgan knew they were in what was known as the Lost Hills country from a map he and Blue Hawk had procured as they headed for Cuidado Hill. It was a habit of theirs to learn about any strange territory they were entering.

The bunch ahead had followed a winding course around low, knobby hills, bending around elbowing crazily-angling criss-crossing little ridges. They finally had followed an antelope path that ran diagonally up the side of one ridge, passed through a little notch and dropped down into a ravine. They seemed unworried about anybody trailing them.

One thing puzzled Morgan. According to that map he had just about memorized, the upper waters of Sudden Water Creek, with its swift current, came down out of these hills, running through a gorge. According to his and Blue Hawk's figuring it would be a ride of several hours along the gorge, back toward Cuidado Hill, before there would be a place to cross where the gorge ended. He wondered how the Vines bunch planned to cross up here.

He soon found out. They left the ravine, turned due west. Half a mile on through a stand of timber they came to the gorge.

Their voices drifted back to Morgan. Dismounting, he left the two horses ground-anchored in a thicket and worked forward. What he saw made his eyes pop. A number of the outlaws had dismounted. Just ahead, beyond the mounted ones, was the gorge, about thirty feet across, deep. From its bottom he could catch the roar of the boiling, fast-running water.

Then, from the heavy undergrowth over to the right came a number of men carrying a narrow, portable bridge. It had no railings. It had been constructed from two long, slim tree trunks as the main supports with smaller pieces of limbs wired to them as crosspieces, something like a corduroy road.

WORKING with the ease of long practise, they swung it upright like a ladder on the stub ends of the pole sides. Several men controlled the upper end by means of a rope attached to the top crosspiece. They lowered the portable bridge across the gorge gap, the other end bouncing on the rocky surface on the other side.

They crossed, Vines leading, but only one horse and rider moved over the structure at a time. Morgan was already figuring how he could take the roan over, then come back for Midnight, when the last rider dropped off to pick up the end of a length of manila rope attached to that end.

When he reached the other side, several men, afoot again, hauled on that rope, levered up the bridge until it stood on its other end across the gorge. Quickly then they stacked it behind a huge boulder back from the gorge lip, and the cavalcade rode northward up along the gorge side, fading in the dimness.

Wayne Morgan felt as if he had missed the last train in the world that could take him home.

He rode out to peer down at the water boiling past the precipitous sides some thirty-odd feet below. If he hit back toward Cuidado Hill to the point where the gorge ended, he would lose the men he had been following. He gambled, pushing northward. About a mile upstream, as the rising light challenged the last vestige of the stubborn night, he found what he sought.

It was a spot where a notch cut the top of the gorge wall to run down in a steep wash to the water.

Out of the kak, digging in his heels fiercely at times, dragging on the halters of the two mounts, he finally made it down to the narrow shelf inches above the swirling torrent. Any man would have pronounced it suicide to attempt to cross the current. But Morgan never hesitated. After all, he couldn't let Pete Burks down. Getting a rough-lock on the mane of the giant stallion, he sent both animals into the water.

It was little short of a miracle. Twice he was almost swept away as the roan all but foundered. Once he was forced downstream, but the magnificent Midnight, as if aware of Morgan's purpose, dragged them through. And when the hoofs of the two horses touched bottom, Morgan swung them some twenty yards upstream to where he had already noted the gorge wall leaned back at a gentler angle. They had to switch-back it to reach the top. And then he was on the trail of the Vines band again.

A little ahead, the gorge angled off past a low hill to the east. Sign told him the bunch had kept straight ahead into a brush-sided defile he could see in the foggy light. He rounded an elbow of rock, edged around a bend.

Two quick gunshots snapped out ahead, then a third, after a pause.

Reining in, Morgan finally realized it was a signal. The thud of horse hoofs drifted back. He moved ahead, more cautiously now, at a slower gait. The miniature valley bent westward again. Then it bulged out, bowed at both sides into a wide valley. It was like coming out of a bottle neck into the bottle itself. Morgan flung the roan beneath him and the black Midnight behind a big clump of brush just in time. For ahead was the camp of the Spider Vines bunch.

Through the blurred air of the dawn, with ribbons of ground mists drifting and weaving serpentine fashion over the landscape, he could make out the saddled ponies of the newly-arrived bunch in front of some cabins over to the right. The vague figures of men moved there, too.

His eyes switched to the left. And the spate of anger that boiled up in his throat almost choked him. For there were the prisoners, the hostages, the little bunch of men who had been spirited off, whom most people figured were dead. There they were, penned in like animals.

It was sickening. They were inside a barbed wire stockade that ran out U-shaped from the west wall of the valley. That side was perpendicular, of solid, al-

most bare rock with here and there a clump of brush. At its base, at the back end of the stockade were a few flimsy lean-tos. Four of the hostages were in sight, one of them leaning on a post of the barbed wire fence. Morgan could see that he was unkempt, his clothes ragged, his face a hedge of beard stubbble. He was emaciated, too.

"How about some of that rotten grub?" Morgan heard him call weakly.

"Aw, shut up!" The answer came from a guard, one of Vines' gunmen, slumped on a box a little north of the stockade. He shot a quick look over to the cabins, then pulled a pint bottle from inside his shirt and took a long pull at it.

"How about me, Big Foot?" another voice called to the guard.

Morgan pushed his head further forward to see whence the voice had come. It was the voice of another gunslinger of the pack, seated on a boulder off to the south of the stockade. He yawned, pushed back his hat, then, elbows on his knees, he propped his bent head in his hands.

"'Nother hour to go," he said sleepily. "And could I use some shut-eye!"

His head dropped lower.

CHAPTER XII

Rescue

NOW Wayne Morgan thought fast. It would be plain suicide to try a charge into that valley to release those poor devils, he realized, as he saw a fifth one stumble weakly from one of the two lean-tos. There were too many of Vines' men to jump.

He looked at the straight stony side of the valley at the back end of the stockade. And it came to him what he had to do. Turning the ponies, he walked them back down the bottle-neck for some distance. Then he switched the roan to the right and sent it up the low side of the valley, the big stallion following.

It was thickly timbered with heavy underbrush up there. It was slow work moving back to where the valley bulged out, then pushing around it until he reached the steep rock side above the stockade. But luck was with him in one respect. The sun was halfway above the eastern horizon. But it was like a dull red hole burning hazily through the blanket of a heavy overcast.

The morning was muggy, the air murky. Ground mist still snaked around and up out of that valley, at times blotting out whole portions of it. As he took the coil of manila rope from his saddle-horn and noosed it around a solidly rooted tree at the top of the clifflike side, there were moments when Morgan's view of the two guards was completely cut off.

He let the rest of the rope snake down the low side of the valley. It came to about six feet from the ground inside the stockade. Just before he started down, a vagrant puff of breeze out of nowhere opened a rift in the ground mist, so he could see across to the cabins for a moment. His sharp, alert eyes took in the fact that the saddle ponies of Vines and the men who had ridden in with him a little before were gone. He could see other ponies, unsaddled, on a picket line beyond the end cabin. But there were just a few, maybe seven or eight.

He didn't waste any time then trying to figure out the answer. He slid over the lip of the valley side and quickly lowered himself, hand over hand, with his powerful arms. Once he swung around, his back to the rock. He saw that the guard on the boulder was dozing. The other, on the box—Big Foot—sat so that his side and part of his back was turned to Morgan. And he was busy taking another pull at his bottle.

It was Miles Scane, Mike's cousin, who spotted Morgan descending. Morgan recognized the man because he had the same stocky build and the same wiry untamed hair as Mike. Miles opened the mouth in his sunken face in amazement, then choked back a cry. He came hurrying

on legs weak from near starvation, toward the rope end, staring as if he feared he was seeing an apparition. Morgan dropped from the end of the rope, immediately crouched low.

"Who're you?" the excited Miles Scane blurted in a hoarse whisper. "Wh-what does— How—"

"I've come to try to get you out," Morgan answered in a voice as low. "Name of Morgan. Friend of your cousin, Mike."

Another man had come up, a tall, skinny man with the same direct gray eyes as Pete Burks. He had caught Morgan's words.

"I'm Al Burks," he said in the nervous voice of a broken-spirited man. "They—they just got my second son, Pete. They rode in here with him, then took him away again short while after." He rubbed his half-bald head with a shaky hand. "I don't know—I don't know." His voice quavered.

"Don't worry," Morgan told the father. "We'll take care of Pete. He's working with me."

But the fact that Spider Vines and his riders had gone out again, apparently while he, Morgan, had been working through the trees up on the valley side, puzzled him.

Then the others were herding around.

There was Racker, the store clerk who had robbed the till. Morgan could pick him out easily by his pallor, that of a man accustomed to indoor work. Bob Lassell, though gaunt and haggard, he could identify because he had black hair and green-flecked eyes like Rita's. So that meant that the fifth one, a sawed-off fellow who seemed almost as broad as he was high, and had a snub-nosed pan-flat face, must be Mal Balban.

"Don't all hang right atop me," Morgan whispered quickly. "Some of you turn your backs, amble around a little like nothin' had happened. You can hear me. Like I said, my handle is Morgan and I aim to get you out of here—"

"You just got yourself into the trap, Morgan," said the gray-haired, stooped Racker. "There's them two guards. And if you start a ruckus with them, there's about seven-eight of the sidewinders still left over in the cabins. Nope, Morgan, you can't do it."

"Couldn't you of had sense enough to get the Law, bring out a posse?" demanded Bob Lassell bitterly. His weak mouth worked. "You just got two guns. We can't help you."

THE CROUCHED Morgan looked around at the others.

"Can you get that drinking guard, Big Foot, over to the wire on any excuse?"

"Sure," answered Mal Balban who had been studying the big man carefully. "I got a little *dinero*. I been buying tobacco from him for days. 'Course he charges me four-five times what it costs him."

"All right. Go to the wire and call him over. You, Miles Scane, you stand at the wire right close beside Balban. You two will make a screen for me."

A point hit him then, a point that emphasized the brutality of the revenge-crazy Spider Vines. Apparently Miles Scane had been found with a smashed body and face at the bottom of that old quarry. Of course some other poor devil they had killed had been garbed in Miles Scane's clothes and tossed down into the quarry bottom. He tongued lips that were suddenly hot and dry with the fever of temper, of fury. Nothing was too evil for Spider Vines!

"Hey, Big Foot—Big Foot, we need some makin's in here," Balban called in a muted voice. "How about it?"

Big Foot, a heavy-featured swarthy rough with a thick protuding underlip, said:

"You got the price? . . . Awright." He took his time in getting up, stretched indolently, then shuffled over, pulling a sack of Bull Durham from a pocket of his rusty black coat. A couple of feet from the wire, he halted. "Gimme the *dinero*, Balban! No money, no smoke." He stood there sneering.

Mal Balban and Miles Scane stepped slightly apart. And from behind them, Wayne Morgan straightened, a Colt

muzzle jabbing out.

"One yelp, Big Foot, and you'll be hanging your headpiece in hell's own bunkhouse," he warned softly.

Big Foot's jaw sagged, the heavy underlip hanging loose. "Hunh? What in hell—"

"Close that big mouth, Big Foot, and come over closer or the sunlight'll be shinin' through your belly," Morgan ordered.

The stunned guard moved toward the wire. Morgan struck with the speed and fury of a wildcat, whipping out his second weapon. He brought it around in a side swing, hard, against the side of the man's head. Big Foot collapsed in the dirt like a sack suddenly emptied.

Miles Scane and Balban needed no instructions as to what to do then. They reached through the wire, and each got one of Big Foot's two Colts. Then Morgan had them call to the other guard. Mal Balban finally had to hit him in the leg with a stone to awaken him.

"Tonky, your pard's dead drunk," Balban called. "He just flopped down here, out cold."

"That cussed idjit! Good thing the boss lit out so soon."

The lanky, drowsy Tonky came over to kneel beside Big Foot. "Hey, you fool!"

It was easy for Morgan to lean through under the top strand of wire and bat him unconscious also. That gave them two more weapons.

"Now let's take care of the sidewinders over in the cabins," Morgan said, working his way through between the top and middle wires.

With the advantage of surprise in their favor, in less time than would have been expected Spider Vines' recent prisoners were riding down out of the Lost Hills country. In the van, Wayne Morgan could see the gorge ahead, through the trees. Behind him rode the motley crew, the haggard, half-starved, unshaven hostages from the camp of Spider Vines, all five of them. But all of them save Mal Balban who had been the last to be seized, were too weak to ride hard.

After they had taken care of Big Foot and Tonky, the rest had been easy. They'd had four guns and a knife amongst them by then. It had been comparatively simple to work between the strands of barbed wire, slip around the upper side of the valley in the high, rank grass. Then they had jumped the remainder of the bunch who were in the cabins. One man who had been outside at a makeshift fireplace, cooking breakfast, had made a play to draw. But Wayne Morgan had neatly punctured his shooting arm with a slug.

Now all the members of Vines' pack who had not ridden out with the outlaw leader were back there, disarmed and trussed up. And Wayne Morgan was leading their tortured prisoners away from that hell-hole.

But he was a puzzled man himself. Spider Vines quitting his camp so shortly after having reached it with his latest captive, Pete Burks, was a move on which Morgan had not planned. As he swung along the edge of the gorge in the now clearing day, though the sun still had not penetrated through the leaden heavens, he racked his brain to try to figure out what Vines' move might mean. Where would be the logical place for him to head?

Then Bob Lassell called to him from in back.

"Hey, Morgan, Racker's fallen behind again!" Bob added fervently, "Gosh, I never knew how much I loved that ranch of Rita's and mine!"

MORGAN halted to allow Racker, older than the rest and therefore weaker from the captivity, to catch up. Then it hit him, Bob Lassell's tacked-on remark giving him the cue. He remembered the day he had broken into the Loop L ranch home, and had heard Rita and the outlaw boss, Green Bolero, whom he now knew was Spider Vines, arguing. Rita had been saying he couldn't stay there. And he remembered Vines' angry statement, "This place would be perfect—"

Morgan knew then. Worried by the word that had reached him from town that Pete Burks was going around saying he knew where the Scourge holed up, not knowing whom Pete might have let in on the secret, Spider Vines was shifting his hideout headquarters. Shifting them to the closed-up Lassell ranch! Back in the valley, Morgan recalled, when he had jammed a cocked gun into the belly of one of the outlaw prisoners and demanded to know where Vines had gone, the man had shaken his head hopelessly. Spider had simply said he'd send a man back for them and the captives later.

It would be the Lassell place, beyond any doubt!

But there was still the problem of crossing that gorge. Morgan knew that the great black stallion would get him, astride the roan, back again through the rushing stream. But the others!

Then his eyes narrowed, widened in astonishment, narrowed again. He thought it must be a mirage. But it wasn't. The portable bridge was in place, spanning the gorge! The outlaws had failed to haul it up and hide it on the other side in recrossing it to the Cuidado range.

It seemed like the height of carelessness. And then the big cowboy's trail savvy warned him. He threw up an arm to halt the little column. Telling them to wait, he dropped off and moved up off the bare space into the timber. Quartering, he worked around until he was behind the bridge, edging cautiously through the undergrowth. And then through the foliage, he picked out a blue-gray thread of quirly smoke weaving upward near the edge of the trees.

They had left a guard! And one man, hidden in the brush, could prevent a small army from crossing that narrow bridge that would support only a single rider at a time.

Morgan got the idea. Spider Vines was worried now, had deliberately left the bridge down in case a hasty retreat from the range was necessary. Morgan worked forward until he could see the man seated on a stump, his rifle propped up between his legs as he smoked, three six-guns on a flat boulder within arm's reach, a double-barreled shotgun also stacked against the rock too.

He was a one-man arsenal! But apparently no idea was in his mind of anybody coming from the camp that he'd have to guard against. Behind him, Morgan worked over to the man's right, then tossed a small stone over to the left. The guard jumped up, bringing the Winchester to level.

"Who's there?" he bawled. "Who's that?"

Morgan eased up behind him, made one great spring, and thudded his Colt barrel down stiffly on the bridge guard's head. There was no time to jump him with a gun, then truss him up. The guard lay as motionless as one dead.

After distributing the outlaw's weapons among the handful of ex-captives, Morgan led the way over the narrow bridge. Some time later they were pushing out over the swells of the Cuidado range, headed for the Lassell outfit.

But Morgan had to keep reining the roan down to allow those half-starved, poor weakened devils to keep up with him. Twice they were forced to pull up for breathers—for the riders, not their mounts—before they had gone more than a few miles. Morgan finally could stand it no longer. He told young Lassell to take the others on to his place, that he was going on ahead.

Miles Scane pushed forward. "Look, Morgan, I want to find that snake of a Vines!" he blurted. "I don't give a damn about no grub, no shut-eye, nothin'. *Sabe?* I don't want anything except to get my dewclaws wrapped around that coyote's windpipe! So I don't see the sense in going to Lassell's place!"

"That goes for me, too, Morgan," Mal Balban put in. "What *is* the idee in hittin' for the Loop L?"

"Don't you hairpins think I'm after Vines, too?" Morgan cut in sharply. "One'll get you twenty you'll find him in his new hideout—the Lassell ranchhouse! Head for there, my friends. Now—*adios!*"

He touched the spurs to the rugged roan and was off over a rise in the prairie, the well-disciplined Midnight swinging along beside the hammerhead with no need for Morgan even to hold the stallion's bridle.

He crossed the sandy basin where the mesquite strip stood, came out of it to ride along Loop L fence line. When he came to where the grassy trail split in a fork, he took the left branch that led to the Lassell ranch. Then he heard his name shouted above the drumming hoofs. Whipping out a gun, he pulled off the trail beside a massive boulder. A rider was driving down the right fork.

"Morgan—Wayne Morgan!" the rider shouted frantically. "It's me, Mike Scane!"

He veered his cayuse through the underbrush across toward the left fork. Morgan swung out from cover. He looked past Mike for the Yaqui.

"Where's Blue Hawk?" Morgan asked. He had been thinking about his Indian saddle pard as he pushed closer to the Lassell place.

Mike shook his head, face solemn. "I don't know. That's why I hit back to the camp to try to find you. He went into a tunnel from the creek down there back of the Lassell place. And he never came out, Morgan!"

CHAPTER XIII

Smugglers' Secret

SCANE told the story. He and Blue Hawk had ridden across the Cuidado range to the big creek branch that ran into Big Indian River, hitting it at a point quite a distance south of the Lassell ranch. Then they had had to ride still further south until they reached a strip of woodland.

Cutting down a number of smaller trees, they had cut them into logs. The Yaqui had lashed them together with strips of bark to make a raft. Then, after darkness, they had begun to pole upstream, northward.

"It was a longer distance than we thought, because that crick starts windin' and loopin' up there, Morgan." Finally they had poled up beside the hay flats behind the ranchhouse.

"Hawk worked us over close to the west bank," Mike went on. "He kept studyin' that bank. There's a big chunk of rock that pokes out there. We went on past the elbow it forms in the creek, on upstream. Then we drifted back. And the Injun found what he was looking for right plumb smack in that elbow of rock."

It had been a sort of cave, Mike said. It looked like just a big hole cut in the rock down through the ages by the action of the whirlpool where the big creek bent there.

They had maneuvered the little raft into it. A chamber beneath the bank that overhung along there hid the entrance. Then the Yaqui had lighted a match and had revealed a shelf of rock, and at the back of it a thick plank door on the west side of the cave.

"He pried it open, Morgan. We could see a tunnel leading away from the other side of the door. It seemed to run toward the house."

Morgan nodded quickly. It would, of course. "And Hawk?"

"Went in. I wanted to go with him, honest. But he told me to wait outside. Said if he didn't come out in an hour, I'd know he was in trouble."

The Yaqui had warned Mike Scane not to try to follow him in that case. That would only mean both of them would be captured. Instead, if he failed to reappear, Mike was to ride to the camp to get Morgan himself.

"When I got back to the camp and found your note sayin' you were goin' to trail the man we were after—meanin' Spider Vines—I lit out for back here."

Morgan drew deep on his quirly a moment, then pinched it out before throwing it away.

"Take me to that tunnel entrance, Mike," he said quietly. "And if they've done anything to Blue Hawk—" His face became a steely mask. But the striking

blue eyes seemed to flicker with a cold light behind them.

"By the way, Mike," Morgan added as they started up the left fork, "I've some good news for you." He told him about the rescue of the hostages, including his cousin, Miles. How he was headed this way with the band.

Mike went up stiff-legged in the stirrups, face split in a huge grin.

"You—really—got—him—out?" he said breathlessly. "By grab, I'd like to ride back to meet him!" Then he sobered. "That can wait, I reckon. We got business ahead. I'm stickin' with you, Morgan."

It was not long before they were within sight of the Lassell ranchhouse under the leaden vault of the dull sky. A wisp of smoke rose from the tin stovepipe sticking out of the roof of the summer kitchen tacked onto the back of the place. Even as they watched, it petered out. Morgan led the way in a semicircle to loop around and come out on the wide creek up beyond the north end of the hay flats in a little bosque.

"Mike," he said quickly, "you've got to trust me from now on. I want you to go down near that cave, hide in the brush on the bank. I'll be along right soon. But I've got to meet a friend here, a powerful friend who can help us." He nodded toward the giant black stallion. "That's his horse. I've been takin' care of it for him. You wait there for me. *Sabe?*"

Mike didn't argue, didn't try to pry. "Anything you say, Morgan. I'll be waiting." He sent his cayuse up out of the bosque without looking back.

In a flash, Morgan was on the ground and pulling black apparel from his saddlebags. In minutes he stood garbed in black raiment, a long black cloak over it all. Then he slipped on the black domino mask. He swung aboard the black stallion, Midnight, looking like some Satanic avenger, a great black vulture. The Masked Rider was riding again.

Dropping down the side of the river bank, he pushed downstream in the shallow water, out of sight of anybody in the ranchhouse. He could see Mike hunkered down behind a bush beside the stream, watching the elbow of jutting rock and the back of the house alternately. Mike twisted around at the sound of the stallion's hoofs splashing.

"Say—" Then he gaped at the black-clad figure in the mask. "Say, you're the gent who dragged me out of jail! You—who *are* you? And where is Wayne Morgan?" Mike was excited.

THE Masked Rider came back with a query of his own, using that gruff bass voice that was part of his rôle and the disguise.

"Where *is* Morgan, anyway? He was supposed to be waiting back there." He thumbed over his shoulder toward the bosque.

"Why, I left him there!" Mike Scane started.

"He isn't there now," the Masked Rider said shortly. "Well, I know the whole story. He figures to find Spider Vines here, using this ranch as his new hideout. I know something about a tunnel running in from the creek here, too. They's no time to waste. Let's get going."

Mike hesitated, eyes drilling at the mask. "I don't know, now. I don't know you—"

"I'm Morgan's best friend. But if you're afraid to go in, I'll try it alone! The tunnel?"

That last stung Mike Scane. "All right."

Somewhat sullen-faced because of the masked man's high-handed manner, he walked down the bank toward the big chunk of rock jutting from the earth. The Masked Rider could see the hollow carved in it by the water. The entrance was barely higher than a short man's head.

Leaving the stallion ground-anchored on the bank, the Masked Rider followed Mike through the entrance, walking in ankle-high water on a rock bottom, stooping as he stepped in.

But inside was a sizable chamber of rock, the ceiling several feet higher. The Masked Rider cupped a match in his hand and spotted the plank door over to the right just beyond a little shelf. Quickly

he yanked it open. In the glow of the still burning match he could see that the tunnel slanted down sharply for some ten feet over rock. He moved down it, striking a fresh match, his boots hitting damp but hard-packed clay bottom.

The tunnel was good-sized, high enough for a tall man wearing a sombrero, wide enough for three men to walk abreast. It was shored up with cross timbers overhead mounted on heavy posts.

Advancing, the Masked Rider remembered how that old-timer on the burro, down at Redville, had told about smuggling operations, had said they had run the stuff right into the ranchhouse "under their damn boots," meaning the boots of the lawmen. This was how it had been done.

The Masked Rider stood there, letting his eyes get accustomed to the darkness as the match went out. There was the steady sound of dripping moisture. He thought of something as Scane waited behind him. Firing up another match, he hunkered down to study the clay underfoot. There were many footprints, boot marks that overlapped and cut into each other. Fresh boot marks in the damp clay, too.

He knew then, beyond any doubt, that Spider Vines and the main part of his band had already arrived.

The Masked Rider and Mike Scane moved ahead, both with Colts out and ready. The eyes of the black-clad man were accustomed to the Stygian blackness now. He was able to see several yards ahead. His ears were keyed for the slightest sound from in front of them. Their boots made little noise in the damp clay bottom. From behind, Scane said once:

"Why did you snake me out of that jail when you rescued Blue Hawk, mister?"

The Masked Rider whispered over his shoulder: "It was the way my friend, Morgan, wanted it. Tie down that flapping tongue of yours, hombre. Sound carries in a tunnel, you know." He half tripped over a little protruding lip of rock on the floor.

They moved around a slight bend, boots splashing in a shallow puddle formed by seepage. It seemed an interminable trip because, underground with no landmarks, they had no idea how much distance they were covering. The tunnel dropped down another gentle but long slope. Then they were climbing a grade. The Masked Rider guessed they were nearing the house.

He kept thinking of Blue Hawk, wondering what could have happened to him. He had entered the tunnel, had gone into the house before Vines and his pack could have reached here. Then the masked man recalled how, back at Pete Burks place, Yellow Neckerchief and two others had ridden eastward down the trail while Vines and the rest had taken their captive westward. Those three, he figured it now, had come here, had been here when the Yaqui had fearlessly gone into the tunnel alone.

The Masked Rider's teeth locked, jaw muscles knotting. He thought again—If anything had happened to Blue Hawk—

HE TRIPPED over the bottom of a flight of steps chopped out of the clay. He went up ten, eleven, twelve, then faced another door. It grated and groaned as he pushed it inward, sensing that he was below the house now. Mike stumbled on the top step and bumped into him hard. The Masked Rider was thrown off-balance to one side. He thrust an arm to his right. His hand came up against a wooden partition. Half-turning, he probed with his left hand and found another parallel wooden wall of about four feet.

He got the idea at once. They were in the cellar. And the extension of the tunnel moved down a secret corridor over the hard-packed earth floor between the walls of two adjoining rooms of the cellar. A person could have ventured into either room and never have suspected that the wooden partition was not the only thing that separated him from the other room.

"We're in the house now, mister," the Masked Rider whispered back to Mike. "Keep your gun ready to talk tough."

He advanced again, paused as he caught a sound from above. Somebody had been

walking, but had stopped now. The Masked Rider risked lighting another match. A few yards ahead the secret corridor appeared to come to a dead end against the wall of the cellar. But, just before the match went out, the masked man saw the stairs, wooden stairs this time, that ran up to the first floor of the house at right angles to the corridor on the left side of it.

The pair crept up them. The Masked Rider came smack up against what seemed like a blank wall. His fingers told him it was metal, sheet iron. It seemed solid. He probed upward, feeling for a trap-door in what might be the floor above. He could find nothing. The wood overhead at the end of his arm was smooth, without a crack.

The sound of somebody roaring an oath came to them, muffled, from another part of the house. Quickly the Masked Rider struck another match.

At first its glow seemed to reveal nothing. The stairs just seemed to run up against that wall of sheet iron. Looking upward, it was only solid wooden planks, no outline of any kind of a trap-door. Then as the Masked Rider's eyes swung downward they lighted on a short metal lever protruding from the bricks over to the right where the sheet iron ended. Below the lever a slot had been cut downward in the bricks.

"Get ready," he whispered to Mike Scane.

Gently at first, slowly, cautiously increasing the pressure, he worked the stubby lever downward. The big piece of sheet iron began to swing inward over the steps on well-greased hinges. The Masked Rider had to step back and down several steps. The sheet of iron pivoted back until it was almost three quarters of the way open. The black-clad man was staring unbelievingly into the room where he had found Rita the day he had broken into the ranchhouse. Where he had dueled it out with Green Bolero, whom he now knew was Spider Vines, and one of his gun slingers.

The room was empty now, he could see at a glance. He leaped lightly to the top of the stairs, stepped forward, and found himself in the huge fireplace he had noted was strangely clean for a shut-up house. Now he knew how Vines and his gunman had appeared so mysteriously as if out of thin air, in that room. And how they had vanished from the ranchhouse without his seeing them leave.

"Holy Pete!" Mike breathed, stepping up close behind him. "The smugglers' tunnel that old coot at Redville hinted at! By grab, I—"

He broke off as there came more cursing from a room across the big main hall, vicious cursing in a voice straining with wrath, the cursing of a frustrated man. The Masked Rider recognized Spider Vines' voice.

"The damn Injun must be made of stone!" Vines cried. "Mart, take that brandin' iron and get her hot—white-hot. The coals in the kitchen stove'll still be hot. Cutter Joe, you can do a mite more fancy carvin' with that knife! The Injun ain't human but we'll break him yet!"

Quickly guessing at the situation in the room across the hall, the Masked Rider reached back to pull the sheet iron door closed. As he moved it he saw the hook for a crane arm, for cooking purposes, start to rise in the side of the massive fireplace. He got the idea, let go of the door, and lifted the hook up in a slot there. The big piece of metal slowly closed on its hinges.

THE Masked Rider, with Mike Scane hard on his heels, got to the doorway of the side hall just in time to see the door of a room across the main hall pulled open. A bandy-legged, half-bald tough came out, a running iron grasped in one hand. He turned down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the big place.

The Masked Rider sized him up in a swift second. Then his eyes whipped back to glimpse the scene through the aperture of the slowly closing door across the hall. The brief picture sickened him and at the same time sent a spate of rage welling in his throat, half-choking him. Tigerish in-

stinct bade him rush pell-mell into the room with both guns blurting their leaden lingo, chanting their staccato hymn of death. But by sheer savage will power he held himself in. He heard Mike, leaning out beside him, make a gagging sound.

Down at the far end of that room Spider Vines was seated in a chair, legs crossed, drinking from a glass and smoking. Some of his gun-wolf pack were around him. Between them and the door, Blue Hawk was lashed over the back of a heavy chair, stripped to the waist, tied so that his body bowed up in almost an inverted U. The chest and torso of the Yaqui's dark-skinned body was a crimson lattice-work of crisscrossing knife cuts. There were blood splotches on his skin, drops of red on the floor around the chair.

"You lowdown mangy Injun!" Vines said, as he lowered the glass after a swig. "Get smart! We got all day. All night, too, for that matter. Maybe you ain't afraid to die. But it's a-goin' to be the slowest damn death any jasper ever died in his life. Believe me! Hell will be a pleasure after we get through with you, Injun!"

Another outlaw stepped into view as the door halted in its swing, still a couple of feet open. It was the bow-legged, cross-eyed little snake with the yellow handkerchief, Cutter Joe. He tongued the Bowie knife, whetted down to almost razor narrowness, that he held in his left hand. There was a hungry, avid look on his face.

"Injun," Vines began again, "we know you work for or side that masked hairpin in the black cloak. The Masked Rider, they call him. It was him who snaked you and Mike Scane out of that jail! I saw you all that night. Now, do you tell us who he is and where he camps out, or does Cutter Joe do some more fancy carvin'?"

The Masked Rider saw Blue Hawk's stony, impassive face lift, turn from right to left negatively.

"Boss," Cutter Joe said, "I could lop off an ear without killin' him."

Then somebody inside kicked the door the rest of the way closed. Mike's breath snorted out of his nostrils with a rush.

The Masked Rider held up a hand, thinking swiftly. From the rear came the clatter of the man called Mart at the cook-stove.

" 'Divide and conquer,' " muttered the Masked Rider, quoting an old axiom. And he knew how he would do it.

Beckoning to Mike, he tiptoed down to the end of the main hall in the dimness. Then they waited. Knowing what was taking place behind the closed door, it seemed like a couple of eternities. They heard a feminine shriek, a cry:

"Stop, you killing devils! You're worse than buzzards!" There was a thump.

"She's fainted," somebody said on the other side of the door.

Then the Masked Rider realized that Rita Lassell must be in there, too.

CHAPTER XIV

Kitchen Battle

RIGHT after Rita's outcry came the sound of Mart's boots as he headed back from the kitchen. Peeking out, the Masked Rider saw him come up the hall with the red-hot branding iron held upright. He spat on the branding end of it and it sizzled.

When he turned toward the door of the room across the way, the masked man sprang at him from the rear like some great wildcat. He jabbed a gun muzzle into one of the man's kidneys. The tough grunted with pain. The Masked Rider yanked him to one side of the closed door.

"Listen, Mart, if you crave to see another sunrise," he said, in his gruff bass.

Mart twisted a look over his shoulder. When he saw the black-garbed masked man, his face went the color of old dough.

"You're going to throw open that door," that man in the mask said sternly, "and yell that you saw some riders down at the creek at the entrance to the tunnel! *Sabe?* Then you're going to jump back here, out of sight, as if you were going back to the kitchen for another look-see. Try any

tricks, and I'll knock out your front teeth with a slug that'll blow off the back of your head! And you won't be pretty that way, Mart. *Sabe?"*

The man choked up, saliva running from the corner of his mouth he was so scared. He finally made a wobbly nodding motion of his head.

"Yes-s, yes-s." It was barely more than a strangled whisper.

The Masked Rider stepped back a couple of paces, quickly pushed open the door of a room next to the dining room being used as a torture chamber. It was a small room with a single window. In it was a closed roll-top desk and a few chairs. Evidently it was the ranch office.

"All right, Mart," the Masked Rider ordered. He cocked his right-hand gun. His left-hand weapon was pulled out, too, but he temporarily stuck that gun inside his waistband. "Go ahead—or catch lead!"

Mart stood trembling a moment, eyes rolling, the running iron shaking in a fear-palsied hand. Then he gathered himself like a man about to dive from a great height, thrust open the door a foot or so, pushed in his head, and yelled in a cracked voice:

"Boss, I just seen some riders down at the crick! Uh—through the kitchen window. They was right where the—the tunnel starts. Then they disappeared and didn't come back, Spider! They seemed to know!"

Vines' amazed, raging curse cut him off. Mart jumped over to the side, toward the Masked Rider and Mike Scane, jerking the door closed. He started to twist pleading eyes around. Typical of the owl-hoot breed, he was tough when he was with his bunch, a bad one when he had the jump on some poor devil. But now it was different.

He never got a look at the Masked Rider this time. For a gun-barrel chopped down across the back of his head, partially stunning him without battering him unconscious. The Masked Rider's free hand seized him by the neckband of his shirt, and he dragged Mart into that smaller room, Mike following. Dropping the outlaw, the masked man whipped the door shut, save for the fraction of an inch.

"Ebbie," Vines' voice yelped from the big dining room, "take some of the boys and get into that tunnel pronto! Burn down anything you see on two feet! If you only wound some, put 'em out of their misery. Dead men don't do no yappin' much! Kill 'em all!"

Satisfaction surged up in the Masked Rider. For he was sure his stratagem was going to succeed. Through the door crack he saw a gangling man leap out into the hall, head into that side corridor toward the room with the fireplace entrance to the tunnel. Eight others hustled out after him. The masked man heard the sheet-iron at the rear of the fireplace, the hidden door, being opened in a hurry. It clanged shut.

From the front room, after about a minute, the black-clad Robin Hood outlaw heard Spider Vines snort:

"It must be that damn Masked Rider!" He loosed a crackling string of oaths. "I swear that devil must be some kind of a ghost!"

There was a dull thud behind the masked man, in the little office. It was Mike's gun-barrel being laid across the skull of Mart who had sat up and begun to mumble. Mart sank back flat on the floor, mumbling no more. The Masked Rider seized Mike's shoulder.

"Get back in that room where the fireplace is, Mike! And don't let any man come out of that tunnel alive!"

He was moving out of the room, swinging over to the door of the front room even as he spoke. He kicked the door inward.

"Yes, Spider Vines," he said in his deep bass voice, a terrifying figure all in black with the domino mask that gave him a satanic look, "you're right, for once! It is the Masked Rider!"

THERE was one intense moment of silence, of shock. Men stood rooted, frozen, their minds trying to comprehend, to catch up with the sudden turn of events, to absorb that phantomlike appearance of the dread avenger. The

Masked Rider's eyes caught sight of Rita Lassell, leaning against a wolfskin hung on the back wall of the room, beyond the trussed-up Blue Hawk.

"Grab yourselves a hunk of ceiling, gents, if you crave to—" He didn't get any further.

Cutter Joe's knife had clattered on the floor. He started his hands up. Then one of them flicked to the sheath slung at the back of his neck inside his shirt. The steel of a flung knife blade flickered in the dim light of the room with its boarded-up windows and its single lighted lamp.

The Masked Rider tried to swing his body away from it. But it slivered inside his thrown-back cloak, pierced his coat sleeve, driving through it and into the wood of the door frame. It pinioned his right arm back for precious seconds.

"Get him, boys, or we'll all be cottonwood apples!" bellowed Spider Vines.

That hit home with the impact of a slug. They got the idea. Kill or be killed; killed on the spot or have their lives choked out by a hempen necktie.

Spider got off the first shot, jerking a weapon up into sight over the end of the mahogany dining room table. A half-pint outlaw, standing behind the big-bellied leader, started to trigger, too. But the Masked Rider's left-hand weapon was already hurling its lethal leaden pellets. With a twist and a rending of cloth, he ripped his right arm free of the pinioning knife. His second Colt joined the first in its deadly clatter.

It seemed that almost at once the room was filled with writhing ribbons of gunsmoke. Cordite was stinging the nostrils. In the half light, dimmed by the powder-smoke, men were vague, ghostlike figures. The muzzles of snarling guns were like vicious, red-blinking eyes. Everything was blurred.

A slug clipped a piece off the Masked Rider's sombrero brim. His upper left arm was nicked. The flash stung as if burned. But he saw two men drop, saw another throw himself screeching under the table, with a face wound. And even through the gun thunder he caught the sound of another body thumping to the floor.

He dropped to his knees then and, hidden in the smoke, threw himself sideward behind a big padded chair. Reaching out, he thrust the door closed with a slam.

"Get him!" bawled Vines. "He ran out!"

Three men charged down beside the table. The first man suddenly plunged forward as if tripped by an invisible wire as one of the Masked Rider's guns spoke. He came up from behind the chair. The foremost man was already a-sprawl, with a smashed thigh, yelling in agony. The other two pulled up short, throwing up their hands, weapons thumping to the floor, as again they found themselves facing this man who seemed to materialize out of nowhere like some baleful spectre. And, abruptly, there was no more gun blasting in the long dining room.

The Masked Rider strode quickly to the pair who had surrendered, his eyes swiveling around as he tried to see through the smoke. His gun-barrel hammered down twice and the two dropped in their tracks. It was the only way he had time to handle them under the circumstances.

Then Rita called, pointing to a door in the rear of the room.

"They went out that door—Spider and two others!" she cried.

The plucky girl, instead of huddling in terror against the wall, had already darted to the table. She grabbed up Blue Hawk's own knife that had been removed from the beaded sheath suspended from his belt. Hurriedly she cut the Yaqui free.

The Masked Rider made his decision in a flash. The outlaws would be headed for the rear of the house, he realized. He yanked open the hall door and ran past the stairway toward the kitchen. Two quick shots rattled from the room with the big fireplace. Mike was giving those coyotes who were trying to get out of the tunnel a few samples of hell.

He reached the entrance to the summer kitchen, a wooden structure tacked onto the rear of the ranchhouse like an afterthought. It was actually a separate build-

ing, connected with the ranchhouse by a narrow hall about six feet long. In that hall the masked man slowed, edged to the rear.

A BAR of light fell across the kitchen floor, entering by a slot where one of the boards of the covered-up windows had fallen off. Half-crouched, the Masked Rider waited, certain the outlaw crew would have to come out that way. A quick look had already shown him an outer door in a corner of the kitchen.

Suddenly he became aware that there were no more shots from the room where Mike was guarding the fireplace entrance. In the silence that had become brittle with tension, he caught the rattle of a spur rowel behind him. He twisted his head around, just as the door in the inside corner of the kitchen began to swing open.

A man stepped out of the side corridor, crossing the hall softly toward the dining room where now there was silence. Then others appeared from the room with the trick fireplace. Something had gone amiss! What the masked man couldn't know was that Mike Scane had been creased by a lucky ricocheting shot from one of the men fighting to get out of the tunnel.

A man in the doorway happened to glance down the hall, and spotted the Masked Rider. The outlaw yelled, just as the black-clad man finished reloading one of his hot Colts.

At once the Masked Rider realized that he would be caught in a deadly crossfire if he remained where he was. He leaped into the kitchen from the corridor, just as the three who had fled from the dining room barged out of the other doorway. A stout member of the bunch entered first. After him came Cutter Joe, then Spider Vines. And they were riding their triggers as they came because they had heard the bang as the Masked Rider's shoulder whacked a dishpan hung from a wall peg.

It was going to be a fight to the finish this time. This was the jackpot hand, the call. Lead droned around the Masked Rider. He was on one knee to make himself as small a target as possible. He nicked the fat man in the leg, a flesh wound, with a shot. But it caused the fellow to lurch sideward and right into Spider Vines' line of fire. Vines' bullet took him in the side of his head and he was down, skull leaking blood on the kitchen floor.

Little Cutter Joe, with his fancy yellow neckerchief, leaped across the prone body to get behind what cover a small kitchen table offered. Vines stayed back in the shadows of a corner. Simultaneously, one of a pair who had got out of the tunnel threw down on the Masked Rider.

A slug from the doorway grazed the Masked Rider's scalp beneath his sombrero, over one ear. It was just a shallow gash, but he could feel the warm blood running down the side of his face. It had been too close. He had to finish this quickly or they would have him. He slammed the triggers again. The left-hand weapon clicked empty. But its last shot ripped a big splinter from the door leading to the little corridor and the outlaw there jumped back. The masked man's right-hand weapon spat, he himself sidled behind a heavy stool.

Cutter Joe yipped like a kicked cur dog. He had caught lead in his right shoulder. His own gun, in his left hand, went empty. He reeled for the back door of the kitchen. For the moment the battle was between the Masked Rider and the vengeance-crazed Spider Vines. In the grayish dimness of the kitchen, both men missed.

Vines suddenly threw the little table over on its side and hunched behind it, firing from around it. The Masked Rider gouged the edge of the table with a bullet, leaped back to try for an angle on the killer. He loosed another slug at the inner doorway as he saw a shoulder edging around it. Spider sent a slug that gouged the floor just beside the masked man.

The masked man just missed Spider's shooting arm that was exposed, nicked the outlaw leader's coat sleeve with the next shot. And then his right-gun hammer snapped on an empty shell, too. The wily Spider knew it, had been keeping count.

He rose into view, tonguing pulled-back lips as he whipped a fresh weapon from a shoulder sling beneath his coat.

"Well, Masked Rider, I reckon this time—"

The Masked Rider flung one smoking empty weapon, then the other. That one clipped Spider on the side of the head, sending him backward. But he was leveling his fresh weapon anyway. Grabbing the dishpan from the wall, the masked man launched it at him. Then he was grabbing skillets, pots and pans hung along the kitchen wall, chucking them as fast as he could draw back his arm.

A heavy iron frying pan nailed Spider in the belly, causing him to buckle over. The Masked Rider caught him in the shoulder with a big stew pot making him drop one of his Colts. The air was filled with flying kitchenware for fast seconds. Spider was firing, but wildly, his aim thrown off by the barrage.

THEN the Masked Rider, after hurling a big crockery bean pot with a handle, and a heavy iron ladle, rushed for the other end of the room. Passing the door of that little connecting corridor could be as good as signing his own death warrant. But then he knew he was safe from that quarter for a few moments, anyway. For, from the corner of his eye, he saw the bare and bloody-chested Blue Hawk leaping like a panther onto the shoulders of one of the outlaws in that corridor. The impact slammed the man against his companion, knocking him forward, stumbling, and off-balance. From atop the outlaw the Yaqui bestrode, he bent forward, and his knife sank deep under the shoulder blade of one man the while he was almost breaking the windpipe of the other with a forearm hooked under his chin.

The Masked Rider plunged ahead. He got to Spider before the leader could recover. With the mop the black-clad man had grabbed up in passing, he beat that hideout gun from Spider Vines' hand. Then he was on the man, the man who had become a human devil in his insane lust for vengeance for his dead father.

The Masked Rider's big hands dug into Spider's neck, viselike tentacles that knew no mercy for a coyote such as Vines. The writhing Spider's body was bowed back over a waist-height built-in shelf. But Spider Vines didn't die of strangling.

CHAPTER XV

Clean-up Job

CUTTER JOE, struggling to get the back door open, turned just as there was that blood-chilling crack as if a bone had been snapped. One had. It was the backbone of Spider Vines. A terrible look, the look of a man getting his first glimpse of hell itself, jerked his face into a grisly grimace. A long-drawn "Arh-h-h," came from his mouth.

The Masked Rider took his hands away from the outlaw's neck. Spider Vines pitched sideward to the floor, his body, with the spine broken, bent at a crazy angle. He was dead before his body settled to the floor.

The Masked Rider turned in time to see Blue Hawk reel into the room, stepping past the writhing form of the gunman into whom he had put his knife steel. Over by the back door, even as the Rider scooped up his own weapons that he had thrown down, Cutter Joe pushed up his unwounded left arm.

"I surrender — I surrender!" he squeaked. A little burst of hysterical laughter kicked up out of his throat. "But they'll never hang me, never! We never killed anybody. It was just—" The vicious cross-eyes rolled in his head. "I never killed a man! I won't stretch rope! Naw! Ha-ha!"

"I think you will," the Masked Rider interrupted coldly. "You'll have the devil of a time proving to a jury you weren't accessory to a killing, Cutter Joe! A cold-blooded calculated killing!"

"Who? When? Who'd I ever help to kill? Naw. They won't—"

"The man who was found, shot twice in

the back, in the bottom of that old quarry," the Masked Rider came back. "His features were so smashed up he was unrecognizable. They identified him by the clothes he wore because they were the clothes of Miles Scane, Mike's cousin. That man, whoever he was, had been killed, Cutter, by the Spider and his bunch. That includes you. I—think—they'll—try a hempen necktie on you for size, Cutter Joe, and let you dance on air!"

The vicious little knifeman's mouth sagged. The cross eyes seemed to sink into his head, lidded once. "Good Gawd, this shoulder, it—it's—" He doubled over, left arm sagging beside his leg.

Blue Hawk saw what was coming. He leaped. And as Cutter Joe straightened with that blade he had pulled from his boot, cocked his left forearm up to his shoulder to prepare to send it whizzing at the Masked Rider, the Yaqui reached him. It was like lightning the way the Indian's own blade flashed. Cutter Joe sagged back against the door, screeching wildly. Blood spurted from the gash in his forearm above the wrist where a cord had been severed. Never again would he be able to use that knife.

At the sound of boot heels in the hall, the Masked Rider ran into the corridor. Three men were there, three who had returned from the tunnel. At the sight of the fearsome-looking man in black, somehow like a great hawk about to strike, and with their leader not in sight, they suddenly found they'd had a bellyful.

They wheeled half around to dash back and escape through the tunnel. But at that moment, Mike Scane, blood blotching the wiry black hair from the bullet that had creased him and temporarily knocked him unconscious, swayed into sight from the doorway of the fireplace room, two guns in his hands.

When those outlaws sighted Mike, they panicked, stampeding for the front door. They thought of nothing but saving their hides now. Two more, one limping with a leg wound, burst out of the dining room. They hit for the front door also.

The Masked Rider was hurriedly thumbing fresh cartridges into his weapons. The five fugitives bolted out onto the big gallery just in time to see, undead, the prisoners from the valley camp, led by Bob Lassell, pounding into the ranch yard. The outlaws couldn't get rid of their hardware and surrender fast enough.

The Masked Rider was moving toward the front door when Rita Lassell stepped out of the dining room. Now that it was finished, the girl with the greenish eyes was trembling. She put a hand on one of the black-clad man's arms for support.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded brusquely. "My friend Morgan said he told you to stay in Cuidado Hill!"

"Yes, yes, I know," she said in a tired voice, running a hand through the tumbling black hair. "But last night I got to thinking. I knew the Scourge and his pack would be using this place as a hideout camp, now that I couldn't stop them. I thought"—she flushed—"well, I knew that the Scourge liked girls. And I thought—well, I was desperate, going crazy over what they might do to my brother Bob. I was ready to do anything to get him freed." She leaned back against the wall, her nervous hand tightening on the masked man's forearm. "So I came out and—and—" She shook her head.

HE LOOKED down at her.

"Suppose we have the whole story. You thought your brother had been slain. Then maybe you got word?" He paused.

She nodded, with her head bent.

"Yes. A strange rider told me in town that he wasn't dead, that I'd get word from somebody. I kept begging Herman Tanson to talk. Then—the evening Wayne Morgan got me out of the way when they killed Tanson with me right beside him they—the Scourge, I know now—sent a note to my room when Morgan was there. It warned me not to talk, to stay away from Morgan—'that man', the note said—or something really *would* happen to Bob."

"That all?" the Masked Rider asked.

"N-no. Afterward I got orders to unbolt the front door when the Bonanza closed up and they'd be counting the receipts. That was the night of the holdup. Again they threatened me with Bob." She shrugged. "I—I—"

The Masked Rider nodded. "Reckon I know the rest, ma'am. Morgan and I are mighty close friends."

Before he knew what was happening, she had her hands on his shoulders, was on tiptoe. She kissed him.

"Whoever you are, mister," she breathed, when she finally drew away, "you're a man, a fearless man, with the courage of a tiger. I've never seen anyone like you."

The Masked Rider's eyes danced through the slits of his domino mask.

"Ma'am," he said, "your brother's outside now with the other captives. My friend Morgan freed them at the outlaw hideout camp in the Lost Hills country."

"Bob is here?"

She flitted by him, calling her brother's name. Then she was in Bob's arms as he bounded up the steps of the porch.

It was a joyous reunion. Half-hysterical laughs and sobs with the release of pent-up emotions were intermixed. Mike Scane and his cousin, Miles, wrapped each other in a bear hug, then danced around like a pair of orey-eyed Indians on allotment money day. Mal Balban kept shouting that he wanted to see his wife, that he'd half kill a horse getting to her.

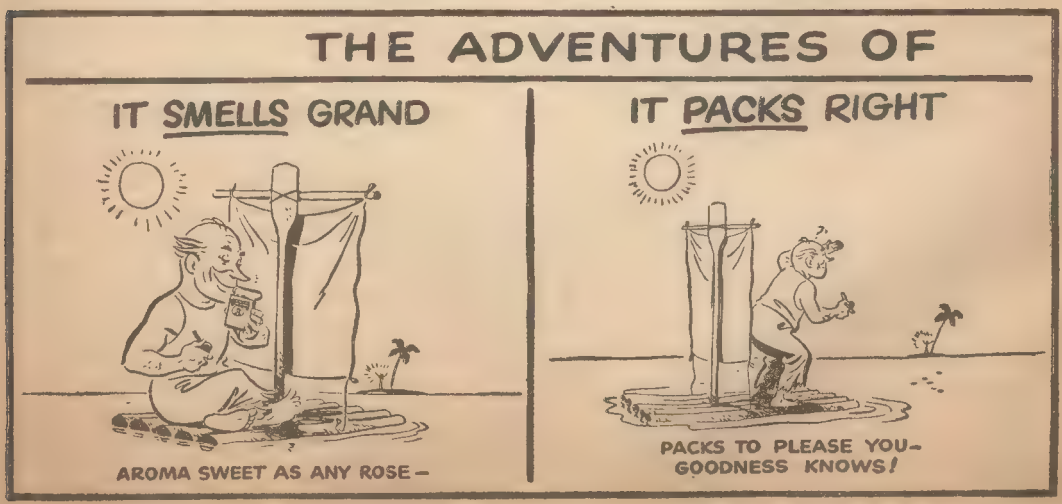
Al Burks strode across the gallery to the Masked Rider. "Say," he asked, "where's Morgan? I want to find my boy, Pete, that Spider Vines took away from the camp with him."

The Masked Rider, in the fury of the gun ruckus, had forgotten the plucky younger son of Al Burks. On a hunch he led the way upstairs. They found young Pete lying on a mildewed mattress in a bedroom, bound and gagged. When he was free, and had been helped up, tears rolled down the father's sunken cheeks as he clutched his son in his arms.

Back downstairs, the Masked Rider realized he had heard enough from scattered bits of excited conversation to know that all the cases had followed about the same pattern as had Rita's. With the exception of Pete Burks, and Morgan had forced the Spider's hand on that one.

Some close relative or descendant of those seven who had freed Crake in the shooting of Ab Vines by their testimony, had been selected. Save in the case of old Racker, one of the witnesses, who was still alive himself. Obviously they must have found some way to force him to do their bidding, to steal the store's cash at gun point.

Spider Vines' next move, after capturing a relative or descendant of those seven, had been to hold them as a club over the head of the witnesses to be pun-



ished, to make them carry out his commands. And the idea of those commands was to make those who were forced to obey them criminals, hunted men, wanted by the Law. It was a diabolical scheme, such as only a man with a twisted mentality, a mind that had been brooding on retribution for years, could have concocted.

The Masked Rider fired up the quirly he had rolled, and headed for the door again. He reached it just in time to confront Sheriff Joe Macklin as the lawman came up the steps. Behind him, Marie Balban, who had ridden out from town with him and the posse just swinging down, was already in the arms of her husband, Mal. And Banker Tom Balban, haggard-faced, was strangely misty-eyed as he stood gazing on the nephew he had thought doomed.

"What in tarnation is going on here?" blurted the huge-beaked sheriff. When Tom Balban had routed him out of bed before dawn with the word that Rita had slipped out of his house, the lawman had got together a posse and headed out for the Loop L. "What does this mean? Say, who in blazes are you?" He had spotted the Masked Rider.

"Friend of Wayne Morgan's, Sheriff."

"He's the man who whipped the Spider Vines outfit practically single-handed, Joe Macklin!" Rita called. "Where *is* Wayne Morgan, I wonder?"

"I don't savvy this," Joe Macklin blustered.

Blue Hawk came walking up the hall, leading a snuffling, leaky-eyed Cutter Joe. The Yaqui had bandaged the knifeman's forearm.

"We'd better get this man to a doctor quickly," the Indian said.

"Brought Doc Sharpe along with me," Macklin said, turning to call for the portly sawbones who was already trotting up the steps. The lawman looked back, then recognized the Yaqui at the same moment he spotted Mike Scane who stood nearby with his cousin.

"Say, you two jaspers busted out of my jail! You should be behind bars!"

"No, Sheriff," the Masked Rider cut in. "Ralston, at the Bonanza, who identified Blue Hawk as the killer of Herman Tanson should be behind bars. He was working with the Spider Vines outfit! You can probably get that out of him when you have a little heart-to-heart parley with him down at the jail."

"Spider Vines?" trumpeted Macklin. "Why, he's dead, man!"

The Masked Rider shook his head. "Wayne Morgan opened his grave for me, Sheriff, down at Redville. It was empty. Here's the story."

Tersely, quickly, he gave the sheriff, who was finally standing aghast and

[*Turn page*]

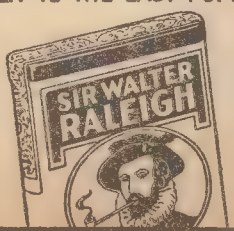
UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

WITH EVERY PUFF YOUR PLEASURE GROWS!
-with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



It costs no more to get the Best!

amazed, lower jaw sagging almost to his chest, the story of the retribution-maddened Spider Vines, his whole game of blackmailing, threatening a person into becoming an outlaw.

"That's right!" put in Banker Balban once. "That's why I— Oh, shucks, I might as well make a clean breast of it—why I let them snakes into the bank and opened the safe for them. They sent me a note telling me they'd kill my nephew, Mal there, if I didn't work with 'em. And Mal's signature was on a piece of paper with the note. So I knew he really was alive. I had no choice."

Others, Mike and Miles Scane, Rita again, interjected remarks as the Masked Rider gave the lawman the whole case history.

"These folks were forced, as a life or death matter for their loved ones, to do as Spider commanded, Macklin," he said. "Forced to commit criminal acts. *Sabe?*"

THE sheriff pushed back his sombrero and scratched his head. "Reckon I do now, mister. That Morgan sure was right when he got my jailor, George, to give him the names of the seven witnesses in that Crake case."

Al Burks said, "If we can only convince that town marshal up at Big Hat, who's got my Jim in jail, about this thing, maybe he'll be free, too."

Joe Macklin jammed his hat down on his forehead, ahead, throwing out his chest. "Why, Al, what do you suppose I'm married to that Big Hat marshal's sister for? Don't you worry none. *I'll* convince Sam Hodges!"

When he turned back to the doorway, the Masked Rider had disappeared. He was already in the room of the fireplace with the sheet iron back that gave onto the old smugglers tunnel.

A short time later, with everybody still excited about the totally unexpected rescue, the joy of seeing their loved ones again, Wayne Morgan, slouched in the kak of the hammerhead roan, and leading a giant black stallion, sloped into the ranchyard of the Loop L.

"Morgan!" cried elderly Jake Racker. "It's Morgan, who freed us up in the Lost Hills!"

"Morgan, sure!" cried Mal Balban, rushing over to the rider.

The others came up too, grabbing for the big cowboy's hand, trying to thank him again, those poor devils who had been virtually buried alive, undead, up there in that hidden valley. "Where the devil you been, Morgan?" boomed Macklin. "Friend of yours is around here somewheres—strange gent with a mask."

"Reckon I lost my way cuttin' across the range," Morgan said easily, in his normal soft baritone. "Spider Vines here?"

"Yep! Here, and in hell, Morgan!" Al Burks said. "He's dead. This masked friend of yours burnt him down, took on his whole outfit!"

"That so?" Morgan dropped from the kak, flashed a look to Blue Hawk once. The doctor had plastered the Indian with salve and Blue Hawk now had a shirt over his sliced-up torso. Then Morgan found Rita facing him.

"It's a good thing your friend, the masked man, did come around, since you didn't get here," she said crisply. "He's a real man. *He* saved the day. But I know you tried, Mr. Morgan. And I want to thank you for everything."

Morgan smiled, remembering that kiss she had given the Masked Rider. "Thanks, Miss Rita. I—well, I tried hard."

"Let's cook up a whopping big breakfast, Marie!" the girl called to Marie Balban. "We've got some supplies in the house."

"And I think we menfolk could stand a good jolt of red-eye, provided the Vines bunch didn't have time to drink up the supply out here," added Bob Lassell.

He led the way in, waving the others after him. After a few minutes, Mike Scane and Mal Balban walked to the front door again. "Hey, Morgan, where are you?" Mike bawled.

" 'S strange," Balban said. "He and the Injun were here just a few minutes ago."

Pete Burks joined them, wondering also.

"You know," he said, "Morgan and that masked hombre, both of 'em were strange ones."

THE MISFIT

By ROLLIN BROWN

I WAS fourteen when Pa bought a cash interest in the Agua Tibia Creek Ranch. Before that, Pa had drifted along from job to job, unable to settle down to anything permanent after my mother died. But he was a hard worker and sheep had always been his business. So after he'd been foreman on the Agua Tibia Ranch for nearly a year and finally put his own savings and borrowed money into the place, I knew his grief had at last decided to let him rest and things had changed for the both of us.

You could see the change on Pa's face as he stood on the mountainside that afternoon in the early summer, looking down at the bear's huge paw mark pressed into the soft soil of the slope. Pa

A Moving Story of a Boy's Faith in His Dog

was thinking about his own sheep now.

"It's the Viejo's track all right," he said, pushing the toe of his boot into the ground beside the paw mark. "But two or three days old—too old for hounds to follow the scent."

Around the high sheep camps, riding with Pa who was doing his own camp-tending, I'd already spent hours listening to all those stories about the bear that for longer than anybody liked to remember had roamed this land—ancient and shaggy and alone, disappearing for months at a time or even years into the farther fastness of Old Mexico, but always returning in the end. The Mexican shepherds had named him El Viejo, the Old One.

Around the campfires I'd heard how one morning Dan Wetherby had found his young prize bull felled in the pasture by a single, mighty stroke of the bear's forepaw. The sheepherders told of El Viejo's plundering among the flocks, killing with a wild predacious fury, or again stealing some heavy ewe from lambing pens so quietly none heard nor till later knew, and avoiding all the traps and guns and dogs set against him through the years.

"All I wish is I had me a good dog," I said to Pa. "One that could follow a scent two or three days old."

Pa turned around. "They don't come that good or I'd be sending you down trail this minute after Dan Wetherby and his hounds," he said. "What's more, a hound is a hunting dog and plumb useless around sheep or worse. I've told you that before. Half the time that pack of Wetherby's is off in the hills running deer or getting into other trouble."

"It don't have to be a hound, Pa. I mean just any kind of dog I could train and call my own would do."

"I know what you mean," Pa said. "We got enough sheep dogs on this ranch. I'd think you'd see all you wanted to of them and could stop pestering me about it every chance you get."

"When you took old Spot out and shot him, you halfway promised me a puppy of my own, Pa."

Old Spot had been on the ranch when Pa first came to Agua Tibia Creek—a lazy, half-blind old dog that spent most of his time lying around in the sun. But Pa had no use for old pensioners and promptly did away with him.

Pa climbed back into his saddle. "You stay here and watch the mules," he said. "That Becky mule has been trying to roll with her pack ever since we left the ranch, and there's two dozen eggs on top for Sanom."

I watched Pa move off into the timber, following the bear's tracks. The pack mules stood tired and quiet under their loads, till presently he returned.

"Just crossing through the country, I guess," Pa said with a nod back upslope. "By this time he's maybe fifty miles away."

WE LINED the pack mules out again, but after this delay it was near sundown before we reached the high meadow where Sanom was camped with an Agua Tibia flock. In the mountain stillness the flock raised a low mutter of sound that was cut by the quick barking of the dogs from time to time or the herder's sharp whistle as the sheep were driven across the meadow to their brush-walled pen for the night.

The flock seemed to flow over the ground, a dust-gray mass that flooded the shallow gullies and moved on, the hoofs making a small, flinty racket over patches of rock.

Pa began to strip packs from the mules beside the herder's tent, which stood near the brush-walled night pen. "Bring me the hobbles, Joey," he called.

I started across to him with the hobbles, and stopped still. "Look, Pa," I said. "Here's a puppy!"

The puppy had been asleep on a bed of old sacks by the wall of the tent. He was standing up now on tiny fat legs, trying to see what was going on. He wasn't more than five or six weeks old. The little flaps of his ears hung down long at the sides of his head, and his

expression was solemn and judicious as an owl's. The puppy yawned and fell over with the effort of it, and I laughed. But Pa reached for the hobbles without looking around.

"I know all about that puppy," Pa said. "Leave him alone."

"You know what I'd call that puppy if he belonged to me?" I asked. "I'd call him Judge because he's so sober. Was there only the one puppy, Pa?"

"No, there was five in the litter. Sanom killed the rest when they were born."

"Killed 'em, Pa?"

"Now you listen to me, Joey," Pa said. "A sheep dog is one thing and a hound dog another. There ain't no place on this ranch for a mongrel mutt, nor any dog that can't earn his keep. What's more, if I ever catch that Buck hound of Dan Wetherby's hanging around one of the sheep camps again, I'll shoot him. I've told Wetherby as much."

I didn't look at the puppy any more than I could help after that. But I could almost feel the chunky little weight of him in my arms, and those funny long little ears as soft as silk between my fingers. I knew just how the puppy's tiny wet nose would nuzzle against my hand if Pa would only let me pick him up once.

When the flock had been penned and old Sanom joined us, I watched one of the three sheep dogs with him—a tawny, alert animal—trot across to her solitary puppy and settle down beside him on the bed of old sacks. But even while she nursed her puppy, her eyes were on the penned flock in the fading light.

The mules clumped away to the meadow grass, hobble chains clinking, and the old herder added fuel to the cooking fire Pa had already started. In the light of the flames Pa and Sanom talked.

From off in the night a coyote howled and another answered from the distant brakes, lifting their voices in a shrill yip-yapping chorus that reached a wild crescendo and stopped sudden as the chop of a knife. The sheep dogs stirred and the tawny female left her puppy and stood on the rim of the firelight, legs stiff and her sharp ears cocked, watching the shepherd for any command.

"She must be a fine dog with the flock," I said.

In the fire's glow Sanom's face was a brown, seamed mask. And he, too, waited motionless. "*Pues,* that is true," he answered at last. "She is young and tireless and has much courage, that one. But something is wrong, all the same, and she listens too much to the voices out there in the night. One night she was gone, and then again. And later I heard Wetherby's big hound baying as they ran together on a trail."

He turned and for a long time studied the tawny she-dog, shaking his head. "The puppy is no good. Yet it is best to leave one of the litter alive till weaned, else she might grieve and become useless with the sheep."

"I don't know why it is that Wetherby can't keep them hounds tied up," Pa said. "Pretty soon they'll find a stray ewe to chase and turn into sheep killers, more likely than not."

After we'd had supper I crawled under blankets with Pa. But I couldn't get to sleep. Sometimes the sheep muttered softly among themselves in the brush-walled pen, and the night wind through the pines at the meadow's edge started a thin, ceaseless whispering. Once I thought I heard the puppy whimper a little.

Pa mumbled, "Go to sleep. What's the matter with you, son?"

"Nothing, Pa," I answered.

I DON'T know when I fell asleep. But dawn was gray in the sky when I woke with an awful start, hearing a sudden mad bleating from the sheep and a sharp crashing of the brush-pen's wall. The dogs were baying furiously. Pa had already slipped into his overalls and was pulling at his boots. He grabbed up his rifle and ran from my view.

There was dust thick as fog in the gray half-light over the pen where the sheep raced every which way. Sanom shouted

to the dogs. There was a shot. I heard a deep, grunting snarl as I ran barefooted after Pa.

No more than ten yards away a bear reared up in the thin, false light and swirl of dust, monstrous and agile and cat-quick, his age-blunted teeth bared and his jaws stained red. The bear looked bigger than a horse. I stopped, frozen in my tracks, and watched him cuff right and left with swift paws at the dogs about him.

The tawny she-dog hurtled high into the air, her yelp of pain cut short as she fell. From beyond, Pa fired again through the dust just then. The bear dropped back on all fours and went charging off across the pen the other way, bowling over sheep in his path. Pa fired once more while the far wall of the pen broke apart, and the bear was gone.

The tawny she-dog struggled to rise with her ribs caved in. The two other dogs followed the bear into the timber with Pa running along behind. There among rocks that the bear had crossed Pa halted and studied a few scattered drops of blood.

"Joey," he shouted back to me, "go find your horse and ride after Dan Wetherby as fast as you can! Hear me?"

I panted for breath. "Pa, was it El Viejo? Was it?"

"Yes. Tell Wetherby we've got a fresh track at last and a little blood, which should help if them hounds of his are any good at all and ain't off somewhere chasing deer or rabbits, which is most likely the case. But don't waste time, son!"

The horses had run off with the mules and it took time to find them. It was noon with the sun straight overhead before I got back with Dan Wetherby and his hounds. But the trail was still fresh. Pa had already gone on afoot. The last I heard of the chase was a far *bloo-oo-ooing* of hounds' voices which faded and was lost finally, leaving only the mountain silence.

Pa did not return that night. It was the next night, long after dark, that I heard a muffled stamping of hoofs from the ranchyard corral and got up and dressed. With the flocks on the high range for the summer, Pa and I kept house at Agua Tibia Creek pretty much by ourselves when we were there. I started a fire in the kitchen stove and put coffee water on to boil.

There was no need to ask what kind of luck they'd had when Pa and Dan Wetherby came in. Pa sat down in a chair by the kitchen table, weary and slack in every muscle. His riding boots had been torn and cut by rocks, so I knew the chase had led them up among the backbone peaks, where El Viejo had escaped as had happened before.

When the water boiled I measured coffee into the pot, and it smelled good. Pa stirred at last.

"We came back by way of Sanom's camp," he said, "and I see you got the mules home by yourself. You did well, Joey."

It was rare for Pa to offer praise. I set the table with bread and butter and some store jam to go with the coffee. But I knew Pa's opinion of Wetherby's hounds had not changed in the least. He'd always hated a mongrel mutt anyhow.

"What's that you got in an apple box behind the stove, son?" Pa asked presently.

"It's Judge, Pa," I told him. But Pa didn't seem to remember, and I thought my own breath would choke me. "The puppy, Pa. Sanom didn't want him, and his mother's dead."

Dan Wetherby laughed and crossed the room for a look at the puppy. "Well, sure enough," he said. "The spit of my old Buck hound. I'll tell you, Joey, if his nose turns out to be half so good as old Buck's, you got yourself quite a dog."

Pa didn't say anything. Dan Wetherby had gone on with his hounds next morning, and I was feeding Judge from a saucer of warm milk in the kitchen before Pa took any notice of him. Pa came in from outside and stood there silent, looking down.

"I aim to train him for a sheep dog,

Pa," I said. "It don't make no difference what Dan Wetherby says."

"You'll be starting in high school down at Clearfork as soon as the fall term begins," Pa reminded me. "Boarding with Mrs. Hewitt."

"It's only sixty miles. I'll get home Christmas and other times, and then next summer—"

"I know," Pa said. "You're growing up fast, Joey, and it's time you made your own decisions. That's what you've just done. I want you to remember that."

"I will, Pa."

BY THE end of summer Judge was more than three months old. It was a comical sight to see him balanced atop one of the mule packs when I rode along with Pa. Judge seemed to think he was just like Pa and me with a mount of his own, and I noticed how Pa would watch and sometimes grin at the way Judge managed to hang on over a rough spot or duck a low limb.

Judge's ears kept growing all the time, and wrinkles forming across his brow added a worried look to his solemn expression. And when he ran on awkward puppy legs, he continually sniffed the ground. Most of all, Judge liked to have me tie a piece of meat to a string and run off dragging it, and then let him take the trail. He'd follow along with his nose to the ground and sniff out every turn.

I never missed anything of my own more than I did Judge during the first weeks in high school at Clearfork. With my eyes on a book, I could still see the high, timbered slopes and the mountain meadows that were frosting brown this time of year and the driven flocks on the move down to the winter range. I could almost smell the dust. In my ears was the barking of the dogs and the shod clatter of the mules under their loads of camp equipment. I wondered if Pa allowed Judge to follow and sometimes ride on one of the packs.

By the time Christmas vacation came along Judge already stood tall as my knees. Agua Tibia Creek was a different place now, with the flocks close-herded on the bottom flats or nearby and the feeding pens at the ranch filled with old ewes and culls Pa hoped to fatten and sell before snow blocked the roads.

Since last summer no one had seen the huge bear's tracks again. It was supposed El Viejo had followed the mountains south into Mexico, disappearing, as he often had before, for months or even years, or that Pa's shot which had nipped him might in the end have killed the bear.

But I'd not forgotten Judge's tawny mother and what had happened, and the half of good sheep-dog blood in my pup.

It didn't show in Judge, with his long ears and the wrinkles on his brow and his solemn expression. He looked like no other dog but Judge himself. Judge was interested in sheep; he liked to tag along. But while a sheep dog watches the flock from instinct as well as training, Judge couldn't keep his nose off the ground. He just had to sniff all the exciting scents he crossed, forgetting everything else.

"But you wait, Pa. Next summer I'll have plenty of time to train him," I promised. "I'll teach him not to go off chasing rabbits or anything else."

Along late in May with the flocks on the high range again, old Sanom fell and hurt himself among the rocks, and Pa sent me up to help him with the sheep as soon as school was out. I was wiry and strong, and I suppose Pa could already see I was bound to grow up with his own liking for the sheep business.

Judge was a year old by this time and bigger than either Shag or Chico, Sanom's two dogs. Both of us learned a lot about tending sheep that summer from old Sanom, who'd hobble out with the flock each morning, leaving the climbing to me.

Judge could be restrained from chasing rabbits or even deer, but his nose was always working. I tried hard to train him, and Judge tried hard, too. He was loyal and never quit the flock. I could leave him on guard for hours near the sheep and Judge would wait patiently.

But with nights turning chill again in the high country, forming thin slivers of ice on a water pail, Sanom's two sharp-eared, sharp-eyed dogs still did all the work and Judge only got in their way as often as not.

Then it was time for me to return to school once more, and Sanom's game leg was no better.

Pa brought Pete Garcia, another herder, up to take charge of the flock. I knew I'd failed, and Judge had, too. I rolled my spare clothes into a saddle bundle, and ordered Judge to stay in camp. That was the way I saw him last, sitting there on his haunches, obedient but hopeful I'd change my mind and whistle him to come along. Pa told me later that three days after this Judge appeared at the Agua Tibia ranch, evidently searching for me. Pa took him back to Pete Garcia and the flock.

THE following winter I don't like to think of. Fall last year had been mild and open, but now snow fell early and blanketed the upper ranges, turning the Agua Tibia Creek road into a mire before it froze and more snow fell. Riding his big roan, Dan Wetherby bucked the drifts into town with mail at Christmastime and a note for me from Pa. Pa did not mention Judge. He put in no word at all about Judge, but Pa was not a forgetful man.

If I could I'd wipe that winter from my mind forever, and also the next spring when I hadn't seen Pa for I don't know how long and stopped Ed Marks on the street one day to ask what must have seemed to him a foolish question.

"You mean that half-blood hound, Joey?" Ed Marks said. "Oh, sure, I know all about him. He stumbled into one of my coyote traps last winter and lost a toe before he twisted free. Left forefoot. You can't mistake his track now anywhere. But your Pa's paid for what sheep he's killed."

Ed Marks' ranch was over on Salt Fork. I remember staring at him, wanting to beat at his face and yell, "You're a liar! It ain't true!"

But I only stared while he lifted a hand to some friend crossing the street, and then clapped me on the shoulder. "Well, on my way home, I'll tell your Pa I seen you, Joey. It's been a pretty tough year for him."

He turned away into Deller's grocery with mud from the stirrups spattered to his knees.

I knew Pa must have got through to town after supplies several times before this. The thing I dreaded most of all now was the day I'd find him waiting for me at Mrs. Hewitt's where I boarded. I knew just how Pa's voice would sound and almost the words he'd say, clearing his throat heavily:

"I hate to tell you, Joey, but that dog of yours got into trouble and so we had to shoot him. Sorry, son." Pa would wait till it was all over before he said anything, knowing how much I thought of Judge.

Now spring came on with a rush of yellow-warm days, as though to make up for the hard winter, and the hills turned green. But still Pa did not come. It was on a Friday afternoon finally that I found him waiting behind the wheel of the old pickup in front of Mrs. Hewitt's house.

"Go pack some old clothes, Joey, and come along," Pa said.

Not the words I'd expected. But the look on Pa's face told me as much. I sat beside him in the pickup, keeping my eyes on the ruts of the road ahead.

"If there was any way in the world I could save you this, I'd do it," Pa said. "I want you to understand that, son."

"When did it happen, Pa?" I asked.

"Along in the fall. Judge stayed with Pete Garcia and the flock for a while after I took him back, but he never gave up looking for you. He was no good with the sheep. You seen that yourself, son, and I suppose Pete Garcia tried to beat some sense into him. You can't expect a hired herder to bother much with a useless dog in the face of weather like we had last fall."

"Did Pete run him off, Pa?"

"Maybe he did. You can't even blame Pete much for that. Judge started wandering from camp to camp as the snow piled up. Flocks were all down from the high country, but scattered apart. For days we were busy breaking trail or sledding hay out from the ranch from dawn till dark. It was an awful winter, son. There was no time to search for a dog. The next I heard, somebody over Barley Flat way had fired on him with a shotgun. Nobody saw much of Judge after that, although sometimes he'd come in close. In the snow there'd be his tracks.

"He killed for the first time over on Salt Fork—an old ewe bogged in a drift. I suppose he was more than half starved. Then he stumbled into one of Ed Marks' coyote traps and lost a toe. He disappeared for a time, but you could always tell his track after that. Later he killed again on Salt Fork. All told, I've paid for around twenty sheep. There's nothing worse on a sheep range, Joey, than a dog turned killer. That El Viejo bear or another just like him has been tracking about these hills again and that means more trouble. But no wild creature is so crafty-smart as a renegade dog. Judge ain't no longer the mutt you loved, boy."

I shook my head, not saying anything.

"There's just one thing to be done," Pa continued. "The flocks are following spring grass up into the foothills, and yesterday Pete Garcia caught sight of him in the brush. Judge ain't forgotten yet. There's enough sheep-dog loyalty in him so he's never killed in the old flock he once guarded. He'll remember you. It's got to be done, son."

I kept thinking of that first summer and the high meadow, seeing the solitary little puppy on his bed of old sacks beside Sanom's tent. I'd wanted a puppy of my own for companionship and to train more than anything. I could remember Judge lapping at a saucer of warm milk I'd put down on the kitchen floor for him, his little sides bulging, and hear Pa's words again. I could understand now what he'd meant, much, much too late. . . .

OUR HORSES' hoofs sank fetlock deep in the new spring grass as I rode up Agua Tibia Creek with Pa next morning. But now I watched shadows along the timber's edge, afraid each would turn out to be Judge. Higher up the creek, two flocks grazed apart but within sight of each other along the sloping foothill valley.

Each year was the same: each spring after lambing time flocks left the home ranch and followed the grass slowly up to the high range, using the old camps and salt troughs and the brush-walled night pens of other years, which a little fresh cutting soon put in repair. The two sheep dogs, Shag and gray Chico, that once had followed Sanom, now tagged Pete Garcia, wagging their greeting to us and reminding me of Judge.

I watch Pa pull from the scabbard the spare rifle he'd brought along and lean it against a rock, not looking at me. The gun was a long-barreled .30-30, that I'd learned to shoot last summer and sometimes carried. Like Pa, I knew Judge had not yet forgotten me. Sooner or later would that nose of his bring him near, rushing toward me, whining his eagerness in the old way I remembered? Or stealthily edging from the undergrowth with a killer's wary caution, uncertain and puzzled?

It did not matter much. I stayed close to Pete Garcia after Pa had left with the two horses, dreading to be alone with that rifle in my hands. In the still evening, sounds of the other flock, bedded lower in the valley, were a gentle murmur on the breeze. Yonder the reddish spark of another campfire glowed in the darkness, amber-red as the eye of a bear. In the distance a dog barked. But nearby nothing stirred.

At dawn we moved the ewes and the lambs at their sides out to the grass. *When will it happen—today, tomorrow . . . when?* I tried to tell myself Judge was no longer the misfit mutt I remembered but a dog I'd never seen before, wily and destructive as the El Viejo bear whose tracks, or those of another

just like him, had been seen on the range once more this spring.

Late that afternoon Pa returned and talked with Pete Garcia for a while. "That must be it," I heard Pa say, "because he's still around somewhere." Then, when he turned to me, his voice had a strange, husky-throated sound: "I reckon, Joey, that Judge won't come so long as Pete is here with you. If you're left alone with the flock, can you do it, son?"

I shut my eyes tight for a moment. "I think so, Pa."

He nodded. "We'll pen the sheep and Pete and me will be down at the other camp. Close enough to hear a shot." The huskiness was still in his voice. "I'm proud of you, boy. . . ."

There was a kind of numbness in me. Stars pricked through the darkening sky above and the night wind started an old, familiar whispering through pine timber higher on the slope. Sometimes the sheep moved quietly or a lamb bleated, nuzzling against its ewe.

The two sheep dogs lay on the rim of the firelight after I'd fed them, noses on forepaws, as often I'd seen them last summer which now seemed so long ago. But it was only last summer that Judge had taken his place by the fire, usually at my feet.

I heaped more wood on the blaze, waiting, with a blanket wrapped about my shoulders against the chill and the rifle across my knees.

Sometime in the later night I must have fallen asleep, for now the fire was dead and dawn was a vague, shadowless light that crept up from the east, outlining the ridges black as ink. Wind through the high timber had ceased; there was no sound. I was shivering, stiff with cold. Both dogs were gone. Then I saw gray Chico, dim as a shadow, trotting toward me on stiff legs.

He stopped, and when I put a hand on him I could feel the soundless growling in his throat and the ridge of hair lifted along his spine. The fear in the animal and the fear in me were one. I could not move. I held my breath, listening.

Then in the gloom, not thirty yards away, something stirred. It took form and I saw the dog standing there, motionless now as Chico at my side. I knew it was Judge. Like this as the drifts piled up last fall, he'd often come near one of the camps searching for me.

THE GROWLING in Chico's throat became an audible sound, and after a moment I heard Judge whine with a soft insistence. I raised the rifle, heavy as lead in my hands, and the sights blurred. I felt the trigger with a frozen, shaky finger.

Wait, Joey—silent whisper. *There's not light enough yet. Your aim must be true or you'll only wound. Be sure . . . be sure!*

There was something else, undefinable as fear itself. I could feel it prickling at my nerve ends, no tangible thing, yet real as the dogs and the sheep and the gun I held. There was a smell to it.

I clutched at Chico, trying to still his growling. The sound from the darkness beyond was faint as the rustle of grass stems crushed under ponderous, stealthy weight. In that instant Shag, the other sheep dog, broke into savage barking, and Chico tore from my grip.

It was like that other dawn in the high meadow that I would never forget, the sheep running and milling, huddled now against the far wall of the pen. I heard again the bear's deep, grunting snarl. There was a shallow ravine that flattened out by the pen, and the dog had halted him there. Dust spread from the ground.

I shouted encouragement: "Chico, Shag—at him! Run him away!" And Judge who'd once guarded this flock with the same two dogs, had he been the shadow there on the slope only a moment ago? My temples throbbed; breath rasped in my throat, thick with the dust.

"Judge! Judge!" I called.

The dogs rushed in and out with a frenzied barking. The bear was back on his haunches, whirling and batting at them, lean from some winter-long den

among the peaks, hungry and shaggy with age, huge. El Viejo!

They'd have run off a lesser bear. Chico rolled end over end, hit by a paw. It was battle old with the atavistic fury of all the times men and their dogs had stood together against the common enemy. Dust swirled in the gloom, and now three darting shadows were at the bear—one of them Judge. My cheek felt the stock of the rifle pressed to my shoulder. The noise of the shot roared in my ears.

The bear snapped and bit at himself. He struck from side to side at the dogs at his flanks, rearing up now in the dim, murky light, raging and clawing, while I worked frantically to jack a fresh shell into barrel, hands clumsy with terror.

It was Judge leaping up on him as the bear turned my way, teeth locked on that huge, slavered throat. The recoil of the rifle rammed at my shoulder. I fired again and again, and they fell apart, the bear rolling and clawing at the earth. At last he lay still, a slack, black mound by the brush wall of the pen.

I could see no more. My knees were too weak to hold me; I dropped to the ground, exhausted and crying.

"Judge! Oh, Judge!"

His warm tongue licked my hand. I pulled him into my arms, bleeding and torn. *Oh, Judge!*

That was the way Pa found us about twenty minutes later, racing his horse across from the other camp. I could hear his horse blowing for wind long after Pa had stopped and stood there, seeing what had happened plainer than I could ever tell him.

"Pa! Pa, look here," I said now. "It wasn't Judge lost a toe in Ed Marks' coyote trap. Look, Pa! Don't that make it all different, don't it? It's been some other dog's tracks that you've found by a kill—maybe one of Wetherby's hounds, like you always feared. Ain't Judge earned his keep anyhow, after this, Pa?"

Pa turned and knelt beside me, examining Judge. "Let him stand up, Joey. It's a remarkable thing what a clawing and mauling a dog can take and still come back for more. Especially a hound—"

"A sheep dog, Pa," I said.

Pa's voice was husky in his throat. "A sheep dog, son."

DINING IN THE OLD WEST

IF YOU lived in the West in the "good old days" when it was young, you'd be happy to fare on a diet that consisted mostly of sourdough bread, baked beans and salt pork. This was varied by what was considered a real delicacy: The raw liver and tongue of a freshly killed buffalo. The fat hump was also devoured with gusto.

Another favorite was "jerky" made from venison or beef, by cutting the meat into inch-wide strips, rubbing it with salt, then hanging it in the sun to dry. Everybody masticated it any old time, just as though it were today's jaw-exercising chewing gum. Other menu-items included dried fruit, onions, flour and coffee, with the solitary seasonings, sugar, pepper and salt.

The absence of milk was entirely intentional, since there wasn't a cowboy existent with any self-respect who would stoop to the undignified occupation of extracting it from a cow. And when this restricted fare resulted in scurvy, the victims cheerfully relied on raw potatoes soaked in vinegar.

Of course there was plenty of the best quality beef at the lowest possible price. Top sirloin sold for approximately 10c the pound. But the meat became monotonous. Maybe that's why one of the most popular Western dishes in the late 19th century was called "Son-of-a-Gun Stew" with very good reason: It contained everything that the cook could lay his hands on, from calf's liver to sweetbreads, tongue, kidneys and heart. He mixed this with potatoes, tomatoes, onions and what-all. It wasn't served till it was cooked to a mush in a big iron kettle. And the dish wasn't considered worth eating if a single ingredient could be recognized. —*Bess Ritter*

Senor Badman Rides

Mark Handel and his gunfighters made a mistake when they reached for Kate Cameron's ranch—because her nephew Will made a specialty of tough treatment for Border bullies!

Both men were bound and left in the brush

an action novelet by WILLIAM L. HOPSON

I

IT WAS late afternoon when the rider appeared through the timber, apparently coming out of nowhere. He came at a slow jog-trot, astride a big bay horse with powerful shoulders and deep chest. The red sombrero, with little balls of gold lace dangling from the rolled brim, was pushed back off the rider's head, hanging by a leather cord around his brown throat.

His head was thrown back in song and there was something in his face, even in the firm pursed lips above his exposed white teeth, that told of a soul that was happy-go-lucky and as rambunctious as a belligerent billy-goat.

> Oh, I love when I please,
> And duennas they do hate me,
> I drink when I please,
> And liquor it doth sate me,
> I kill when I please,
> And Satan he doth hate me,
> I laugh when I please,
> For I'm Lopez, the Badman—

He was just about the gaudiest human being that particular section of the Montana cow country had ever set eyes upon, with his glittering hat, blue Spanish jacket, tight-fitting breeches, silver-mounted spurs, and the two ivory-butted guns with the steer heads carved on the handles.

He stopped singing and grinned, arching his eyebrows and blinking the long, black lashes. The grin was one of anticipation as he rode up to the top of a ridge and pulled up above several huge springs in a ravine below.

The grin vanished abruptly from his face. He stared in amazement at the freshly set posts and newly strung barbed wire.

"So!" the vaquero muttered in Spanish, reaching for a handkerchief to mop his face. "The country is in the grip of the worst drought in years and water is precious. Therefore Mark Handel takes over."

The crash of a big Winchester came from a point down below the springs, some two hundred yards away. The shooter was concealed in the timber, as though he were on guard, so that the fence might not

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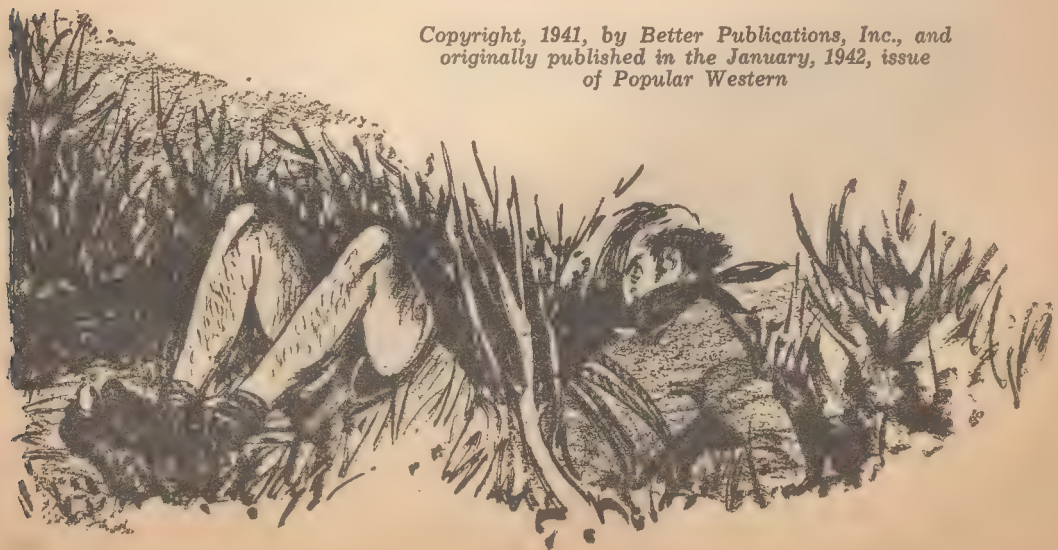

be cut by any intruders. With the rolling report of the weapon, a lead slug snatched the handkerchief from the vaquero's fingers within inches of his face. The white cloth fluttered away.

HARDLY had the roar of the big Winchester sounded when the vaquero slapped dull steel to his bronc. It reared, spun on hind legs and leaped back over the ridge's other side. An instant later more reports from two other concealed Winchesters rang out and invisible bees droned off into the sky. Horse and gaudy rider flashed from view and a mocking voice floated back to the three Handel punchers who had jumped up, Winchesters in hands.

"Better luck next time, *amigos*."

Then the vaquero was gone, the beat of his mount's hoofs drumming as though in derision.

"Gawdamighty!" ejaculated one of the men, levering another shell into the firing chamber of his rifle. "Did you see what I saw?"

The rifleman blinked his rather protruding eyes several times. This habit seemed to have been the cause of a sobriquet, for one of the men presently addressed him as "Blinky." He stood nearly six feet, six inches tall and was as thin as a bed slat. The head that sat atop his unwashed neck gave him all the appearance of a gangling rooster.

He blinked his eyes again, for this was, in truth, "Blinky" Evans, brother of the town marshal in Three Corners. The other two men were Sam Rogers and Ike Eder.

"Did you see it?" he foolishly repeated —foolish because they both had been firing, too. That question seemed conclusive proof that blinking and lanky Mr. Evans was none too bright. "I been hearin' reports that Kate Cameron was hirin' a gun-slammer to fight back at Handel. Looks like this Mex is the one." He chuckled. "You know what I'm going to do?"

"What?" queried the pudgy Mr. Rogers, also none too bright-looking.

"I'm going to catch him, tie him on his horse and take him right in to Handel. It'll give the boss a good laugh to have Kate Cameron's hired guin-slinger delivered to him before he's hardly even got here."

He ran back into the timber. Shortly afterward he reappeared astride a horse, carrying his Winchester in one hand. His long legs flapped hard against his mount's side as he set off in hot pursuit of the man whose head he had tried to blow off. He spurred at the side of the ravine, buck-jumped his horse up, disappeared into the trees and presently pulled out on top. He reined up to listen.

A wolfish grin split his horse-face as the sound of galloping hoofbeats floated back. They were about a quarter of a mile ahead.

Evans slapped more steel to his bronc's sides and slammed off down the declivity, ducking his long frame this way and that to avoid the brushing tree limbs. He spurred on down the other ravine, shot farther into the trees and—

A rawhide riata seemed to leap right out of thin air. The lanky Mr. Evans saw it coming, ducked too late, then felt it burn the side of his turkey-red neck as it settled and snapped tight. The puncher caught a brief glimpse of the dismounted vaquero bracing booted feet into the ground to take the shock.

That was about all Blinky saw, except flashes of the stars, the moon, and Halley's Comet. Then the rawhide snapped tight around his gullet in the immediate vicinity of his Adam's apple and yanked him out of the saddle to the ground. His horse went galloping on.

Evans hit the ground on the flat of his back, and dust flew out from beneath his six-foot-six body. The breath flew out of him too.

"Glurg!" strangled Evans, nor did he need to say more.

The vaquero was working his way closer along the taut rope, much in the manner of a puncher approaching a calf at the end of it.

"Glurg!" gurgled Mr. Evans again, through the loop cutting into his gigantic

thyroid cartilage.

The vaquero leaned down over him solicitously, cupping a hand to an ear, the better to hear him.

"What deed you say, senor?" he inquired.

"Glub-glub-glub!" came from the struggling, recumbent Evans.

"You weel have to talk louder, my frien'; I am a little deaf."

He appeared almost pathetically anxious to understand what Mr. Evans was trying to say. As a matter of record, Evans wasn't trying to say anything, even a lusty curse. What little energy he could summon was being utilized in a vain attempt to get some breath back into him. The fall had practically deflated him. He made more strangling sounds, his long face threatening to become apoplectic.

"Bflishooch!" he finally got out past the rope.

The vaquero gave a helpless sigh of resignation, as though he had done all he could. He straightened and shrugged his wiry shoulders.

"These fonny language I do not onderstand," he explained to the choking puncher on the ground. "I speak the Spanish, the American, the Apache . . ."

He continued counting them off one by one on his slim fingers. Suddenly the handsome face beneath the red sombrero brightened in enlightenment. He beamed upon the hapless puncher, loosening the rope around his neck.

"Ah, I know! I 'ave hear of the Eskimos who live in the north. You"—he pointed an eager finger at the man on the ground —"you are the Eskimo, no?"

THIS was too much. Indignation did what Evans' struggles had failed to do. It brought his breath back with a rush.

"No!" he bawled at the top of his lungs and half rolled over on the ground, his hand streaking to his hip.

The vaquero moved twice as swiftly. His right boot toe lashed out and the Colt went spinning into the air. Evans let out another bawl of pain and helpless fury, grabbing at his aching wrist as the Mexican's Colt came out and covered him. With a few deft loops of the rawhide, the vaquero trussed the victim's arms behind his back. Evans' vitriolic oaths of vengeance were shut off as his own red bandanna was stuffed between his jaws.

The vaquero looked about him for something to secure the gag. His eyes lighted on the belt holding up Mr. Evans' pants. He unsnapped the buckle and yanked hard.

Evans had to suffer the indignity of feeling his legs bared to the chill evening air. He stood hobbled by his pants and mouthed venomous mumble after mumble into the gag. Tears of rage and outrage sprang to his eyes. His horse-face twisted into contorted expressions and his eyes rolled around in fury. He began to hop around on his hobbled feet, forgetting the rope around his neck. It suddenly snapped tight and he went over backward. Strangling sounds sifted through the gag when he landed. They sounded like a tomcat that was trying to fight its way out of a blanket.

"Caramba, soch language!" exclaimed the vaquero, and hurriedly trussed him up, for more hoofbeats were disturbing the air.

Sam Rogers, leaving Ike Eder to guard the springs, was hurrying to assist Evans in the capture of the gunman.

When he had leaped from the back of his galloping horse with riata in hand and let it go looping on down the ravine, the vaquero had carried in the other hand his .45-90 repeater, rigged with special sights. Now he levered open the breech of the big gun to make sure of the heavy shell in the firing chamber. He closed it again and stepped into the underbrush just as Rogers hove into view.

Sam Rogers hardly could have been described as a handsome man as he bore down upon the spot, ducking this way and that to avoid the branches. His legs were too short, his body too much like a barrel, and he wore—of all things to be seen in the West—a greasy cap with a broken visor instead of a Stetson. The resultant

exposure to the hot sun that had poured heat and drought down on that section had given him an unlovely scarlet countenance.

His countenance got still redder when the vaquero suddenly stepped out of the underbrush. Handel's second puncher found himself gaping down what looked like a stove pipe with special sights on it. The fancy lead-sprayer was pointed at the fourth button on Mr. Rogers' shirt, counting those that had been missing for months, perhaps years.

"What the blazes!" he spluttered pulling up in a hurry and shoving his hands high.

"*Buenos dias, amigo,*" greeted the visitor in the gaudy raiment.

"Hah?"

"Eh?"

"You can't do this to me!" shouted the puncher, not being able to think of anything more appropriate at the moment.

"*Caramba,*" sighed the vaquero. "Never 'ave I see soch hospitality extend to a poor, harmless stranger. But you will get down, yes?"

The repeater shifted a bit until Rogers could look right down into the muzzle.

II

ROGERS was, for all his rotundity, a game man. He sized up the vaquero, who stood on the left side of the horse. Then he lowered his hands to the saddle-horn and lifted a leg up over the mane to drop off on the opposite side, which would put the animal between them. His booted foot went up. It paused right in mid-air with leg extended as the muzzle of the repeater jabbed closer.

"No, no, *amigo,*" corrected the man in the red sombrero. "Get off on this side, please. Ees quite plain to be seen by your cap that you are the tenderfoot who know little about a cow 'orse. One always gets off on the left side. Thees you mus' remember. If not, perhaps you get hurt sometime when the 'orse no like it."

Rogers let out an oath and complied, dropping to the ground. He cursed again as his gun-belt was taken.

"You can't get away with this!" he spluttered angrily. "There's been reports around that Kate Cameron was hirin' a gun-slammer, and Handel'll have every one of his sixteen punchers huntin' you down like a coyote. Rufe Evans, the marshal in Three Corners, will be after you, too. He's the brother of— Say, where's Blinky?"

Before the vaquero could reply, there was a thumping sound from nearby bushes. The thumping increased. Branches rocked and swayed and trembled. Then into view rolled a bound and gagged figure whose bony shanks were exposed in all their unalluring hairiness. It was, of course, Evans. He seemed anxious to communicate his feelings to them.

"Mumph—unch—schlunch!" he said from behind the gag.

Rogers then blistered the air with his oaths. He swore so loudly, in fact, that the curses sounded to the vaquero as though the puncher wanted them to carry a considerable distance. So again the man from below the Border used a bandanna to good advantage.

Right in the middle of Rogers' erudite and vitriolic predictions about the vaquero's coming trip to a certain warm region down below, the puncher's oration abruptly was shut off. Presently Rogers, too, sat on the ground beside his threshing companion, his shorts the only protection against the elements.

The vaquero waved good-by, picked up his Winchester and set off afoot up the ravine for some personal business with still a third Mark Handel puncher, one Ike Eder.

At that precise moment Eder was still on guard above the main water supply of Kate Cameron, which Handel had fenced in, and was determined to hold. The woman's only other source of water, more springs some distance farther west, had that day had a heavy charge of dynamite placed in them by more Handel riders, who then had fled.

Eder lay on his stomach up above the springs, watching the placid scene below.

He scratched an unshaved, underslung jaw and wondered what had happened to his two cronies. So far there had been no shooting from the direction the pursuit had taken.

"Wish them two fools would hurry up and get back," he complained, massaging a place under his chin with a dirty finger.

Then he broke off and cocked an ear as sounds came from somewhere back in the timber. He rolled over lazily, and an oath broke from him as his own mount wandered into view with reins dragging.

"What the devil!" ejaculated the puncher. "I left the fool horse tied back there. It must have got itself loose."

He got up angrily and headed for the horse. It stopped with reins still trailing and looked at him, ears pointed forward. Eder started an oath of rage at the animal, broke it off short as he spied the fresh ends of the reins. The leather had been cut.

"What the devil!" he ejaculated again.

Then, surprisingly, came an echo.

"What the devil!" it whispered back somewhere nearby.

Eder jumped nervously. He looked this way and that.

"Blamedest thing I ever heard," he growled.

"Blamedest thing I ever hear, too," replied the echo with a Spanish accent.

EDER behaved exactly as though somebody had jabbed him with a pin. He jumped nervously again and half whirled toward the place whence he thought had come the answer. He raised the Winchester to his shoulder and cocked it. He whirled this way and that way so rapidly that for a moment he looked like a hombre doing a solo waltz. Excitedly he began backing toward his horse, which sidled off toward a nearby thicket.

From somewhere to his right came a noise as a thrown stick struck the ground. The Handel puncher saw it as he spun too late. From the thicket a .45-90 roared spitefully. A startled yell of pain burst from the Handel puncher.

A 300-grain slug of lead had struck the barrel of his Winchester and ripped the weapon from his numbed hands. It exploded under the spasmodic jerk of his finger, clattered to the ground, and Eder's arms instinctively shot skyward. He kept them there as a gaudy red sombrero rose up out of the green brush.

Five minutes later a strange little procession of two men made its way through the timber toward the fenced-in springs of Kate Cameron. Eder, cursing blue streaks, walked ahead with both hands up, trying to get used to the idea of walking around in long, red, woolen underwear. He made his way, stumbling ahead of his captor, who sat Eder's own saddle. Around the hapless victim's neck was his own rope, by which he was guided as though it were a leash.

"Ouch!" groaned the Handel rider, picking a burr from his bare foot with one hand. He looked longingly at his boots and trousers, which were back of the cantle.

They pulled up at the new wire fence that Eder and his companions had spent five hours putting up. The vaquero's eyes had taken on a hard glint.

"Tell me, my frien'. You work for one Mark Handel, whose bran', the H Bar, ees on thees horse I ride, yes?"

"What about it?" growled the captive sullenly.

"Why does he fence in the spreengs?"

"Because he needs that water for all his stock. Because that fool woman and her three crippled-up old cowhands ain't got no business with their place. Because Handel is lettin' people know who's boss of this country. That's why!"

"In other words," said the vaquero, his accent entirely gone, "the drought forced all ranchers to sell, which glutted the market and lowered prices. If Handel could get water, he could keep his herd until higher prices come back. At the same time he could force Kate Cameron out and get the whole shebang."

Eder forgot his discomfiture to look up at the man in the saddle.

"So you know all about it, huh?" he snarled. "Old Shorty Perkins, one of the

Cameron woman's crew, has been hintin' around that there was a gent on the way to take a hand. Well, that ain't going to do her no good. She'll just have another corpse to bury."

"Ain't impossible," admitted the vaquero tersely. "But that corpse'll have a lot of company when it gets buried. And my guess is that the Cameron woman will still have her ranch. Here, take these wire cutters off the saddle and get busy.

"What!" bawled the puncher, remembering the hours of sweat and torn hands to get that fence up.

"Cut it!" ordered the man from the Rio sharply. "Cut the wires and drag them clear!"

With a final oath the H Bar puncher gave in, gritting his teeth in helpless rage. He set to work with the cutters, but even that was not enough to stop him from snarling:

"Just you wait! Just you wait till Mark Handel hears about this!"

THE little cowtown of Three Corners squatted in rustic quiet in an open space about a half-mile square, surrounded on all sides by pine and fir trees. On this night, as was his cutom, Mark Handel sat in the dining room of the Big Fir Hotel, a sizzling steak on a wooden platter in front of him. He was bathed, freshly shaved and hungry. The three-mile ride to town in his shiny new surrey, driven by an educated Chinese valet, had whetted his appetite.

He was only in his early forties, but already he had, with his gunhands, brought trouble to the entire country. His eyes were dark and his hair was black. Everything about the man bespoke sauveness. His manners deliberately made clear to these ignorant cow folks that he read good books, played the piano—though rather badly—and took early morning "canters." Backed up by sixteen hardened gunhands, a renegade town marshal named Rufe Evans and a crooked lawyer, within the space of a year Handel had made himself hated, yet feared.

The lawyer, who entered the dining room where Handel ate alone, was a furtive-eyed man of the shyster type. He came over and sat down.

Handel looked up inquiringly.

"Are you sure we're in the clear on the fencing of Kate Cameron's springs this afternoon, Temple?" he queried softly.

There was something brittle underlying the soft voice that told the lawyer they had better be in the clear.

"Everything is absolutely in the clear, Mr. Handel," he said hastily. "We'll lose in court, of course, but our action is only to tie up the springs until title can be established. By then, without water, the woman and her three broken-down cowhands will have been forced to give up. I did a little—er—spying before I came in. She's down at Judge Ike Norton's house at the moment, the silly creature."

Something like a sneer curled Handel's ascetic lips. Judge Norton had been trying to marry the widow for a long time.

"I heard that rider of hers, old Shorty Perkins has been talking about the fact that a gunhand of some sort is coming," said Handel. "I'll have the boys give him a reception that he won't forget. It will be his last one."

Right after the lawyer's departure, the immaculately dressed cattle baron suddenly realized that he was not alone. A stranger had entered, seated himself a few tables away and was ordering a beef stew from the waiter.

He was a handsome young Mexican, apparently, judging by his high-peaked red sombrero which lay on the table beside his plate. Handel took a second look as the rider hungrily started in on the stew. The man probably was a Rio tinhorn, up north for some easy pickings.

The thought made Mark Handel smile. An ex-card sharp himself, he played nightly just enough to win steadily and maintain his skill. He paid Marshal Rufe Evans well to keep the field clear for his own operations. That reminded him that he had to see Rufe after supper and have him take care of the stranger.

At this precise moment the cattleman's thoughts were interrupted by the appear-

ance of an alert young Chinese in American clothes, who smoothly but swiftly made his way among the tables.

"Wing, you know better than to interrupt me when I'm dining," snapped Handel irritably.

"I'm sorry, sir, but—"

"Did you order Tascum to have the new mount ready for me at sunup?"

"Yes, sir," replied the Chinese without a trace of accent. "But I'm afraid you'd better come outside."

"What is it?"

"You'd better see for yourself, sir."

With a gesture of impatience, Mark Handel removed the white napkin from his lap and stood up. He followed his valet out through the arched doorway to the front porch, where loud snickers were coming from a quickly gathering crowd. Then Handel's suaveness gave way and a curse broke from him at sight of his riders.

There were three of them astride one horse. Blinky Evans rode in front. Sam Rogers rode in the middle. Ike Eder held down the aft end of the overburdened mount. All three were bound and gagged. All three had their bare feet lashed together under the horse's belly. But more important, all three were clad only in their underdrawers.

III

WHO looked the most mournful, it was difficult to tell, the bare-backed horse or the three trouserless riders. Eder's eyes rolled wildly above his gag as the wandering animal edged over to the hitch-rail and sought the company of its kind. The snickers of the crowd gave way to loud guffaws, and the sounds brought a wave of rage to Mark Handel's face. He knew clearly that somebody was playing him for a fool.

"Wing, get those men loose!" he ordered.

He turned as a tall, cadaverous man, wearing two low-slung guns and a star on his vest, pushed his way through the crowd. This was Rufe Evans, brother of the unfortunate and angular Blinky.

There was little resemblance between the two, for the murderous town marshal was everything that his brother was not. He wore a drooping mustache and was fishy-eyed, but he was cold and deadly and merciless. And, although the citizens of Three Corners didn't know it, Handel had hired him mainly because he was a renegade sheriff who had killed seven men.

"Rufe, get those fools out of here quick!" said Handel to his marshal. "I'll be the laughing-stock of this town. Get them out of sight, find out what happened and come back immediately to the dining room."

Evans nodded. Wing had already cut the three loose with a penknife, slashing the bonds holding their bootless feet under the horse's belly.

Ike Eder was the first to get down and tear his gag loose. He had to pry his jaws apart, for they had been gagged for hours during the ride to town, and the muscles were almost paralyzed. He found that out when he tried to talk.

"'Ait till I get 'im!" he yelled, dancing around and shaking the fist at the guffawing spectators.

Blinky Evans took his long horsy jaw in both hands and waggled the lower half of it back and forth to restore the circulation.

"Who did it?' Handel finally snarled, unable to bear in silence the laughter of the spectators, for he knew they were laughing at him, too. "Who did it, Blinky?"

"I'll blog him in the schlunch blog blog!" shouted Evans stiffly.

After that incomprehensible statement, he followed his beckoning brother, the marshal, around the corner and out of sight, stepping carefully because he wasn't used to walking in his bare feet.

Handel pushed his way back through the crowd. It took all the ex-card-sharp's iron will to control himself as he reentered the dining-room.

The man with the darkly tanned face and curly black hair had finished the stew

and was preparing an assault upon a large slab of blueberry pie. There was something unbelievably innocent in his handsome young face. He held the three-cornered piece of dessert in both hands, one sharp corner of the succulent pastry pointed toward his mouth.

Some crooked instinct warned Mark Handel that perhaps it was not coincidence that his three guards, who had been at the springs with Winchester, had arrived in town at about the same time as this stranger from the Rio country. He would soon find out, he decided grimly.

So, as the pilgrim leaned forward and opened his jaws wide for the first crunch, Handel spoke with deceiving pleasantness.

"A long way from home, I gather, aren't you?"

The stranger straightened and turned, the slab of blueberry pie still in mid-air.

"*Si*, senor," he said and turned his attention to the pastry again. He opened his jaws wide and leaned forward again.

"Going to stay in Three Corners long?"

Again the pilgrim straightened, the pie in both hands. He appeared to be politely annoyed at the interruptions.

"*Quien sabe?*" he answered, shrugging fatalistically, and concentrated his attention once more upon the dessert.

If he saw that Marshal Rufe Evans was coming in through the arched doorway and that the mustached, cadaverous lawman had made some kind of signal to Handel, he gave no sign. That expression of complete innocence was still on his face as Handel's hand slid beneath his coat for a Derringer and Evans came closer, one hand ominously close to his right hip. The marshal was set for a cold-blooded killing. Handel was prepared to back him if anything went wrong, though both knew that was impossible.

Abruptly the slab of blueberry pie left the vaquero's hands and splashed a blue mess over the expanse of Handel's freshly shaven chin and his shirt front. Up over the edge of the table there appeared as though by magic the gaping muzzles of two heavy Colts. One of them froze Handel in his seat, the .41 rim-fire Derringer slipping back into its place, his face draining of all color at the lightning speed of that draw. The old Colt halted Marshal Rufe Evans in his tracks.

It was then that Handel saw the notches under the barrels of the fancy Colts, a long row under each until the things looked like crude buzzsaws. The cattleman swallowed hard.

THE vaquero relieved him of the Derringer, ordered Evans to drop his gunbelt, then picked up Handel's own pie in one hand. He got his hat on, somehow, and stuffed his mouth with pastry.

Handel had regained control of his faculties by that time.

"Know who I am?" he half-whispered. "I'm Mark Handel. Those were three of my punchers outside. I've got thirteen more on the ranch. There are sixteen men who'll get you no matter what happens if I order them to do it. You can tell Kate Cameron that."

"*Si*, senor. Ees that all you weesh to say?"

"Get out!" choked the cattleman.

"*Si*, senor."

Evans, however, had shown himself the cooler of the two. Not a whit of expression changed his blank face as he looked at the man stuffing pie in his mouth while holding a heavy Colt at his right hip. When Evans spoke, his voice was just as blankly unemotional as his dead face.

"We'll meet again," was all he said. There was something in the way he said it that made that meeting a certainty.

"*Si*, senor, I sincerely hope so."

The vaquero backed toward the kitchen, still stuffing pie in his mouth. At the swinging doors he whirled and vanished. There was a tinkle of spur rowels, and then came the sound of a horse's hoofs drumming away into the night.

The darkness blended horse and rider into one phantom figure as the vaquero loped away from the main part of town and headed down across the flats toward a low, rambling white house. There was a saddled horse out front that he knew

belonged to Kate Cameron.

He circled around to the back, swung down and started through the back gate. As he did so, there was a sudden flurry in the yard in front of him, followed by loud feline yowls. The yowls rose louder as the two circling cats suddenly sailed into each other to settle their feud with fang and claw.

For about fifteen seconds the two tore up the ground as they fought and snarled and rolled. After that one broke and fled, with the other in hot pursuit, its fuzzed-up tail high in the air. The pursuer caught sight of the two-gun intruder, pulled up short, then sidled over to investigate.

The vaquero reached down and picked up the victor, a huge yellow tom.

"Why, hello, Smart Aleck." He chuckled, running his fingers along the cat's spine. "Still lickin' everything. Never lost one yet, huh?"

Smart Aleck arched his spine in ecstasy and rubbed a battle-scarred jaw against the vaquero's smooth cheek. The vaquero carried him past the window of a front room, where three people sat conversing nervously and waiting impatiently.

Kate Cameron was the middle-aged widow whose springs Handel had that day fenced in. Judge Ike Norton was the bearded little man who wanted to marry her. A wizened, crippled oldster the vaquero soon identified as Shorty Perkins.

"His letter said he'd be in tonight and for me to meet him here at your house," Kate Cameron was saying to Judge Norton. "I do hope nothing has happened to him. He's such a helpless young boy."

The vaquero grinned and left the window. A moment later the front door opened and the man in the red sombrero, with Smart Aleck under one arm, was framed there in the light.

"Hello, Aunt Kate," he said.

"Will-yum Barnaby Cameron!" cried his aunt, and rushed into his arms.

She hugged and kissed her nephew. Judge Norton shook his hand warmly. Smart Aleck arched his spine against the elegant boot. William Barnaby Cameron dropped his red sombrero over the cat and sat down in a chair across from them.

"Your letter caught up with me while the show was playin' in Cheyenne," he explained to Judge Norton.

The sombrero suddenly became imbued with life and glided off across the floor. It cut a few erratic circles, backed up a time or two, bumped into a chair, then moved toward the opposite wall as Smart Aleck tried his luck in another direction.

"I'm Lopez, the Mexican badman," Cameron explained, and sheepishly displayed nineteen big notches filed on the underside of his fancy gun barrels. "Fancy Colt shootin', knife throwing, and trick roping. I'm especially good at roping." He grinned. "I reckon this Handel gent must have moved in since I left three years ago."

CAMERON told them what had happened at the springs and in town. This caused a worried frown to pass across Judge Norton's bearded face.

"You shouldn't have riled him, son. Handel's bad, make no mistake about that. And that town marshal of his won't forget what you did to his brother. I'm afraid you're in for it."

"No, he isn't," Aunt Kate cut in quickly, worry showing in her work-worn face. "I won't have him killed over a burned out ranch. Why, he's only a baby! He'll sign those necessary papers we wanted him to sign and get right out of the country again."

Judge Norton cleared his throat. He shot a look at the woman he had been hoping for years to marry.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Kate, it's not as simple as that. There's been a slight miscalculation on my part. After I wrote William to come home, I rechecked the land office records. I find that William's father—your brother—made a mistake in filing his homestead claim. There's just enough discrepancy so that Handel has filed instead, tied up the water and will fight you in court."

"You mean I don't own Aunt Kate's place, after all?" blurted William Barnaby Cameron.

"You do, son, but you'll have to get into a court fight to prove it. The water is tied up until then, which is what Handel wanted, anyhow. He knows you've got to have water on that place and can't get it until after the trial. By then your aunt will have been forced to quit and move out. Handel's men put a charge of dynamite in her other springs this afternoon. She didn't even bother to go over when she heard it go off."

"I guess I just didn't have the heart," she said wearily.

"I'll go over first thing tomorrow," Shorty Perkins spoke up. "But trouble's a-brewin', what with Handel thinkin' you've gone and hired yourself a gunslammer—"

He broke off in confusion as the woman fastened her eyes on him with a stern gaze.

"So," she said dangerously, "now I know who's been making this idiotic talk about my hiring a gunfighter. I ought to wring your neck, you little rooster!"

"I—uh—well," Shorty weakly defended, "I kinda hoped, when I heard you had sent for yore nephew, that mebbe it would scare Handel."

"Never mind, the damage has been done," she cut in brusquely. She turned to her nephew. "William, where are you going?"

William Barnaby Cameron had gone over to his sombrero, which was bucking itself up and down in a corner. He put it on, hoisted the visibly relieved and now purring Smart Aleck to his shoulder, and grinned.

"To attend to some business, Auntie. If I look through my binoculars during the next few days and see a pie in the kitchen window, I'll know Shorty and the other two boys figure the ranch ain't bein' watched by Handel's men." He looked at Judge Norton and nodded down at the cat in his arms. "Still the champ, eh, Judge?"

"Never lost a backyard fight yet, son," chuckled the old man.

William Barnaby Cameron put Smart Aleck down and opened the front door. In the darkness he turned and put his head in once more.

"As for the pie, Aunt Kate, make it blueberry. It's my favorite."

The door closed, spur rowels tinkled and presently hoofbeats drummed off into the night as the sombreroed man loped away from the home of his friend, Judge Norton.

He headed out through the timber along the very road that Mark Handel used when his shiny new surrey brought him in for supper and gambling. Inwardly Cameron was a lot more worried than he would have cared to admit. He had seen anxiety in his aunt's face, and there could be no denying the fact that Handel had her in a tight spot.

A HALF-mile from the H Bar spread, Cameron suddenly pulled up sharp. A movement from the ground near his horse's feet had caught his eye. Two tiny bright orbs glowed suspiciously up at him, above which was the outline of a bushy tail.

The skunk eyed the horse and its rider, sniffed disdainfully and ambled away on its hunt for mice.

The rider moved off and swung down. With a knife from his belt he hurriedly cut a slender twenty-foot pole. He tied several lengths of pigging string together and fastened them to the pole. When he got through, William Barnaby Cameron had a fair imitation of the lasso used by the pampas gaucho—a sort of lariat on the end of the pole.

Hence the most startled animal in the country that night was that same disdainful skunk when a loop was suddenly dropped over its bushy, upended tail and the string hoisted it into the air. Furthermore, the hapless *Mephitis mephitis* had been taken so unexpectedly that it had had no time to unlimber its heavy artillery.

It merely dangled there upside down while it involuntarily continued its journey, getting madder and madder.

Presently the dark buildings of Handel's H Bar loomed up.

IV

CROWDED within the H Bar bunkhouse were sixteen punchers, listening to Handel. The ex-sharper had arrived in his surrey a short time before, carrying three trouserless, enraged gunmen. Handel had also cursed all the way from town.

By this time the unfortunate Blinky Evans, Sam Rogers and Ike Eder had raked together new clothing of sorts. The mournful-looking Evans had borrowed an extra Colt. He dangled the weapon in his hand, a vindictive gleam in his blinking eyes.

Handel was saying bluntly without mincing words: "I don't know who this Rio gunman is, but he's got us in a fix. The whole town is laughing its fool head off. Everybody in Three Corners knows it's a showdown and they're pulling for Kate Cameron's hired gun-slinger. He's clever, that Mex. He knows he hasn't a chance against a whole outfit of sixteen, working single-handed, so he's trying to make fools of us. He's using the one thing I can't stand—ridicule. I want you men to get him cold. There's five hundred in it for whoever downs him. Don't worry about the law. I'll take care of that."

"I'll get him, all right," growled Mr. Evans, bouncing the heavy six-shooter up and down in his palm suggestively. "Tie me up, will he? Bring me to town on a horse without any pants on, hey? I'll show the no-good skunk!"

At that precise moment one of the aforementioned animals put in a sudden and unexpected appearance. This one appeared to have sprouted wings, for it came sailing in through the open window and landed squarely in the middle of the closely packed group.

Sam Rogers, holding borrowed pants that were too big for him, let out a bawl of pain and clapped his other hand to his eyes. There was a wild scramble for the open door. Blinky Evans swung up the Colt in a foolish attempt to put a stop to the carnage that had made the air unbreathable.

"Don't shoot, Blinky!" shrieked Eder imploringly, cut off from the door. "Let it go out. For Gawd's sake, let it—"

There was the flash and roar of a heavy .45. Fur flew, but the writhing skunk was dying gamely. Its final dying defense caught Eder squarely in both eyes, and this brought bedlam afresh.

Rogers, holding his bulbous nose with one hand and his pants with the other, tried to squint through streaming tears. He gave it up and made a blind rush at where he thought the door ought to be. It wasn't there. It was five feet to the left. He collided head on with the logs and went down. A half-dozen boots were planted on various parts of his anatomy by escaping punchers before he could get up.

He stumbled out into the darkness, bumping into a cursing Ike Eder. Mr. Eder was almost weeping with rage and disgust at Blinky Evans.

"He shot it!" he yelled to nobody in particular. "The fool had to go and shoot it instead of letting it—" He groaned, holding his nose and backing away from the blinded and blundering Rogers. "Get the blazes away from me, Sam. For Gawd's sake, go away!"

It was fifteen minutes before any semblance of order was restored. By that time Mark Handel was alone. Sixteen grim-faced and determined gunhands, as odorous a crew as ever straddled leather, had set forth to stake out Kate Cameron's spread four miles away, though with little hope of success this night. As the disgusted Eder had remarked:

"He'll smell us comin' before we get within two miles of the place. Three miles, if the wind is right."

Handel strode through the darkness toward the ranchhouse, his face livid with blind rage. He was half-gagging from the skunk scent all over his clothes, jerking savagely at a shirt whose front already was liberally streaked with blueberry pie stains.

"Wing!" he bellowed savagely. "Wing!"

The Chinese came out, cautiously keeping his distance.

"Yes, sir?"

"Get my bath ready at once. I've got skunk all over me. Have Tascum take these clothes out and bury them."

TWO hours later he settled himself in bed. Once or twice, before his rage finally cooled and let him doze off, he heard sounds of returning riders. Maybe they had got the Mexican. Handel went to sleep, thinking hopefully about it.

The ex-card sharp of the H Bar prided himself on being an early rider. It gave him no small touch of inner pride, in his role of gentleman rancher, to go for a brisk canter in carefully cut riding clothes just as the sun peeped up. The buck-toothed night wrangler, Tascum, was always given strict orders by Wing to have Handel's favorite mount ready at the same time each morning.

It was shortly after daybreak when Mark Handel, as was his custom, emerged from the ranchhouse in riding breeches and carrying a riding crop.

He went past the blanketed forms of sixteen men, asleep on the ground near the chuckwagon. He sniffed unhappily as he ran by the odor emanating from the abandoned bunkhouse.

At the corral he stopped and looked about for the night wrangler.

"Tascum!" he called out sharply. "Tascum, where the devil is my mount?"

A young milk-pen calf ambled into view past the corner of the corral and paused to give him a foolish stare. Handel stared foolishly back at the calf. It wore a pair of pants buttoned up around its hind quarters. Boots and spurs were on its hind feet, and a floppy-brim hat had been tied on its head. Holes had been cut in the battered hat to make room for the calf's ears.

Handel immediately recognized the hat as the personal property of Blinky Evans.

The calf stretched out its neck at Handel.

"Mawwww!" it bawled at him.

From somewhere nearby there came faint thumping sounds. The livid-faced owner of the H Bar climbed the corral fence and dropped to the ground. As he headed for the ice-house, two more of the milk-pen calves put in appearance. These, too, had gone civilized in the matter of attire, being clothed in the trousers and boots of Sam Rogers and Ike Eder.

Handel's lips were two thin white lines of helpless rage when he reached the log shack that was filled with saw-dust-covered blocks of ice, cut from the big pond behind the ranch, during the winter months.

He let out the half-frozen wrangler. Tascum's buck-toothed countenance was blue with cold. But that wasn't all that caused him to shiver. There was fear in his face.

"Don't you go yellin' at me—I'm quittin' right now!" he cried out before his employer could say a word. "Sneaked right up on me, he did. He was grinnin' like a cat, too. Said if I was on this ranch by noon, he'd let drive from long range with a forty-five-ninety and blow me in two. I'm drawin' my pay, Handel!"

The ex-card sharp turned away without answering and headed back to the house. It was all he could do to control himself.

"Wing, I'm not riding this morning," he snapped at the Chinese. "Get my coffee right away."

"Sorry, sir, but there's no suitable water left on the ranch," was the grave reply.

"What?"

"Somebody shot a coyote and dropped it down the cistern. Our water supply is ruined."

That was only the beginning. From that moment on there was never a let-up, and things went from bad to worse. Day and night a group of determined gunhands went on the trail of the mocking vaquero, who had become a phantom that gave them no peace.

Early the next afternoon four men, staked out around Kate Cameron's little place over in the timber, came back quickly to the H Bar. Their heads were bandaged, their hands tied behind their backs. They all demanded their pay.

"You yellow-livered scum," sneered the cattle baron. "You're supposed to be gunhands, eh? Take your pay and get out.

I've got two men hidden with Winchesters at a place where the Mex is bound to show. They'll be in shortly."

HIS trusted men came within an hour —astride a single horse, one supporting the other in the saddle. Handel choked down a cry of sheer helpless rage as they rode up.

"Yep, we got him all right," snarled one in answer to his employer's question. "Spotted him in the timber and gave chase. He just turned around in saddle and let drive twice with that big repeater of his. First bullet killed my horse and broke my wrist when the blame animal fell. Second smashed Slim's shoulder. We're headin' for town to see a doc, Handel, and we ain't comin' back!"

That cut the H Bar crew from sixteen to nine. By the third day Mark Handel no longer went to town for his evening meal. With every fresh exploit of the phantom badman, fresh guffaws of open laughter swept the jeering citizenry.

He finally tried to bluff it out by going to town. But as Wing drove up to the front of the ranchhouse and Handel got in, both rear wheels of the surrey collapsed. The spokes had been cut part way through around the hub.

He rode in on horseback out of sheer spite, while his riders set out afresh in the darkness.

At eleven that night he got back to find a terrified Wing tied up in a clothes closet. The three milk-pen calves were placidly blundering around in Handel's upstairs bedroom, attired in three of his nightshirts.

Two hours after the frightened Chinese had packed his things and fled on foot to town, a lone rider pulled up about a half-mile above the H Bar. It was warm, and the starry sky outlined boldly the high crown of a big sombrero. With gunnysacks muffling his horse's feet, the rider worked his way down a decline to where the last vestiges of the drying pond remained behind the H Bar.

The place was now little more than a slimy mud-hole, yet thirsty cattle by the hundreds stood around the last of the H Bar water supply, nervous and sleepless.

William Barnaby Cameron got down, removed the gunnysacks and swung up again, taking his slicker from back of the saddle. He put the reins in his teeth and took a Colt in one hand. Then he slammed dull steel to his fresh bronc.

With a roaring Colt spouting short flame spurts toward the night sky and the slicker twirling above his head, he charged straight into the herd. Those cattle, already nervous, broke in an instant.

There was a rumble of hoofs, frightened bawls. And then, amid the scene of confusion, a phantom rider faded into the night.

"Round two," muttered William Barnaby Cameron, grinning in the darkness.

Next morning Mark Handel called in Rufe Evans for a showdown.

The angular manhunter rode out from Three Corners and arrived at the ranch about mid-morning. He reined up by the bunkhouse and unemotionally surveyed the signs of confusion everywhere.

A big, oblong water tank of galvanized tin rested its sieved length on a wagon-bed. It had been literally slashed to pieces by a fusillade of .45-90 slugs, fired from long range as Blinky Evans and Ike Eder returned with it from a distant well.

The marshal rode over to the chuck-wagon, where one of the hands was busying himself around the fire. The cook, too, had fled on the heels of the Chinese valet.

"Where's Handel?" grunted the taciturn killer.

The puncher straightened from over the water barrel on the ground, lifting out a dripping galvanized bucket. A bullethole in the bucket had been plugged with a wooden peg wrapped in cloth.

"Down at the tank," he said significantly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Him and what few of the crew's left. Some more quit this mornin'."

V

EVANS rode on, dropped down a gentle declivity, and the bawl of cattle came to his ears. Dust rose everywhere

in brown clouds as he reined up at the edge of the tank, where nearly a thousand head of cattle were pushing and shoving around the edge of the water, not daring to enter the mud. Riders whirled in and out, using double ropes to keep back the cows from where four sweating, mud-covered men were at work.

Handel rode over, dirty and unshaved, haggard from loss of sleep.

"Look at them," he said wearily. "Two hundred head bogged down when he stampeded them into the tank last night. We've pulled out sixty, so far."

Marshal Rufe Evans looked at the cows that lay bunched like mud hens, bogged down to their necks. The cadaverous, taciturn marshal saw his lanky brother and Ike Eder working with a team and long chain. Blinky waded out to the cow, pushed the chain down through the ooze under her chest, pulled it up and fastened it to her.

"All right!" he called out to his crony. "Get the fool cow out so she can go bog her fool self down again."

"Get-ee up!" shouted Eder to the big team, tightening his lines.

The double trees, hooked onto the chain around the cow, snapped taut off the ground. There was a grunt, a lurch and the slime-covered white-face was dragged free to solid ground.

She got up and promptly charged her rescuers.

MARK HANDEL threw up both hands with a sigh of resignation and rode off, followed by the emotionless manhunter.

"It's been that way since daylight," he groaned.

"How much you payin' to get him?" queried the marshal, without wasting words or time.

"Fifteen hundred dollars—to you," snapped the cattle baron. "That's a dollar a head for every cow I've got."

Again the murderous marshal didn't waste words.

"Round 'em up and start 'em for the Cameron woman's springs pronto," he said. "I'll take care of Shorty Perkins, up there on guard. I'll use him to get that Mex, too."

He rode off again.

High up in the timber above the ranch, William Barnaby Cameron watched him through binoculars. The glasses also told him that Handel was starting an immediate drive for the springs.

"Reckon I better go over there and get Shorty away," Cameron decided. "He's just game enough to try holdin' 'em off and gettin' himself killed."

He went back to his horse, mounted and took a leisurely, roundabout way back to the big springs in the ravine. Pulling up to the very crest where he had been fired upon that first day, he looked about him.

"Hey, Shorty!" he yelled. "Shorrrteeee!"

There was no answer. A sense of uneasiness crept over Cameron. He called again, and again received no answer. He rode down to where Shorty had been left on guard.

He saw the blood almost at once, a crimson splash on a dry stick. For the first time since his unorthodox fight against the H Bar outfit, something really cold and dangerous came into Cameron's deeply tanned face.

He followed the boot tracks of a bigger man who had carried Shorty up to his horse and then ridden off, leading the animal. He took up the trail, driving deeper into the heavily timbered country, following a plain trail made by two horses.

Several hours later the sun was up overhead, towards noon, but Cameron went on, bent low over the horse's shoulder.

"It couldn't have been one of Handel's punchers," he muttered, "because I just counted 'em all with the herd, what few ain't quit or are under Doc's care in Three Corners. I know it ain't Handel, either, so I reckon that leaves—"

Rufe Evans!

"I should have known it!" exclaimed Cameron, his lips going white with dread for his friend.

He straightened in saddle and wheeled his horse, half expecting the shot to come at any moment. He swung out wide,

spurred away from the trail and set off westward again at a mile-eating lope. For two miles he drove forward without a letup before circling around to head off his quarry. He rode up to a ridge, then ducked back as he saw the two horses less than two hundred yards away.

On the ground, head bleeding from a blow of Evans' gun barrel, lay the unconscious figure of the crippled little Cameron rider.

Cameron tied his mount and took off his spurs. He shook his gun sheaths sharply to loosen the heavy Colts, and then began working his way toward the two horses.

Evans was nowhere in sight.

The avenger who had declared a one-man war on Mark Handel and his outfit worked his way past the unconscious form on the ground, slipped into the underbrush. He began moving on hands and knees toward the crest of a ridge above him. Up there he had seen the bushes move, had caught the glint of noonday sun on a Winchester barrel.

Evans, he realized instantly, had laid a trap with Shorty as bait. No wonder that trail had been left so plainly!

It took the vaquero an hour to cover that last fifty yards. Ahead of him the taciturn marshal lay flat on his stomach, peering down below, waiting for the pursuer to come within range of his gun.

"Wonder where the blame Mex is, anyhow," he finally muttered aloud.

"Right here behind you," replied a cold voice.

The marshal froze, turned slowly and got warily to his feet, leaving his Winchester on the ground. Thirty feet away stood the man in the red sombrero with the little balls of gold lace dangling from the brim. Evans saw then that his face was not swarthy, but merely tanned, his eyes not black, but deep brown.

"You're not Mex," he said calmly.

"I'm Kate Cameron's nephew," was the grim answer. "I own her place."

"Glad to meet you," said the six-gun expert.

His hand dipped down with blinding speed. It flashed up again, but smoke and flame spurts were gushing from Cameron's hips. The double crash of .45s came in rolling roars as lead blasted the marshal's biceps. It seared him, ripped him, smashed the bones in his arms to pieces. It sent his Colt into the dirt, never to be picked up again, for Evans would never throw another gun.

Cameron sheathed the smoking Colts and bound up Evans' bleeding arms with the marshal's own bandanna, torn in strips. From pain-dulled lips the renegade sheriff mumbled:

"Why did you do it? Why didn't you finish me off?"

"Because," William Barnaby Cameron said quietly, "I've never killed a man yet and don't intend to."

IT WAS just after dusk that night when Mark Handel again entered Three Corners in his accustomed style, except that he had to drive his own repaired surrey. Cameron saw him enter the Big Fir Hotel dining room, watched as the crook had a steak brought.

A man came down the street, whom Cameron recognized as Temple, the furtive-eyed lawyer. Temple was obviously excited as he hurried toward the hotel. He got still more excited when he stepped around a corner, felt the gun muzzle jab him in the stomach and saw the face of the man back of it.

"I—I just saw Perkins bring Rufe Evans to the doctor's with his arms shot to pieces!" the lawyer babbled.

"I know it," was the reply. "And you're goin' right in and tell your boss the same thing. Tell him they're just down the street." He added significantly: "I'll be watchin' through the window."

Temple almost shuddered as he hastened to obey. He wanted no more of the cool-nerved avenger who could buck a whole outfit of gunhands single-handed. He went inside, and almost at once Handel hurried out with him. He, too, pulled up sharp at sight of the gun muzzle.

"*Buenos dias, amigo,*" greeted the man back of the Colt. "Get in your surrey, Handel."

"You can't do this!"

"Get in!"

A crowd was gathering and Handel saw nothing but pleased faces at what was happening. His face became livid when he realized that there was no help to be had.

Two more of his gun-hands had left that morning. The vaquero had invaded the bunkhouse a few nights before, blasted the ceiling with lead and scared the whole outfit witless. They had grown haggard from loss of sleep, while waiting for him to return and actually shoot someone. Now they had quit.

He gritted his teeth in humiliation at the snickers of the crowd, but got in and drove to Judge Norton's house. Entering under the prod of a gun muzzle, he found the judge and Kate Cameron waiting as though they had been impatiently expecting him.

"What the devil is this, anyhow?" he spluttered, sitting down unwillingly in an indicated chair.

"A legal transaction, Mr. Handel," answered the judge. "Please remember that you're signing nothing under duress. You may leave if you wish. But I have here an agreement drawn up, whereby, for the sum of one dollar a head—a total of fifteen hundred dollars—you may have the exclusive use of the Cameron springs until the drought is over. That's a small price to pay to keep cattle you'll otherwise have to sell at half-price. It means the saving of your ranch."

Handel was taken aback. He couldn't believe his ears.

"What's the K C going to do for water?" he faltered.

Kate Cameron wasn't a woman to smile often, but she did now. And Judge Norton gave a most undignified snicker.

"Why, Mr. Handel, that is a little debt of gratitude which Mrs. Cameron owes to you. It seems that when your men placed that dynamite charge in her other springs to sink them into the ground, it had the opposite effect. She has more water now than she knows what to do with. So if you'll just sign this lease of the springs and agree not to go to court with your crooked suit, it'll be a much better deal for you than you deserve."

Whatever else could be said of Mark Handel, he was intelligent. He knew his power was broken and that the people of Three Corners would never let him get the upper hand again. And he wanted no more of this new kind of gun-fighter who used such unorthodox methods to wreck a man's ranch and drive off his crew of gunhands.

MARK HANDEL pulled out his checkbook and signed. Then he looked around for the Mexican in the red sombrero. His jaw went slack as he saw the vaquero kissing Kate Cameron and heard him saying:

"Good-by, Aunt Kate. I got just four days to get back to the Wild West show, or they'll be hirin' another trick shot and I'll have to go to work for a livin'. But I'll come back again if there's trouble."

Cameron went to the front door and opened it. At that moment a blast of feline squalls and spitting snarls rent the darkness outside. An object shot across the porch with its tail fuzzed high in the air and ducked between William Barnaby Cameron's legs.

The loser was none other than Smart Aleck, with one ear torn and dangling.

"Why, the son of a gun!" William Barnaby Cameron marveled as he closed the door. "The son-of-a-gun!" he said again as he went out.

He mounted his horse and quickly put a lot of distance between himself and the Three Corners country.

Wayne Morgan takes sides in a deadly range war in next issue's smashing complete novel—DEADLINE FOR SHEEP, by Walker A. Tompkins —an epic of the West featuring the Masked Rider in action!

The smart actor dealt bullets from the bottom of the deck

A SIX-SHOOTER BEATS 5 ACES

By DIXON WELLS

IT DIDN'T take as long as I'd hoped. I laid down a pair of queens, plumb oozing with confidence, and Shelley Bryant, he laid down a pair of kings and I saw my month's wages go sliding across the table. I'd hoped to drag it out a little, anyway.

"Good-by forever," I says, gloomy-like.

Shelley, he twists that handsome mustache up in a little smile. He is a good-looking devil, for a gambler, even if his nose has been busted at some time by a dissatisfied customer. And he is big and rugged too, and plumb poison with a six-gun. Nobody monkeys much with Shelley.

"You shouldn't gamble, Stumpy," he informs me, "unless you are prepared to lose." He spins a silver dollar across the table. "That's for cab fare, my boy. Never let it be said that Shelley Bryant set his victims afoot."

I let the cartwheel lay. There ain't no hansom cabs or any other kind in Cowlick and he knows it. Just being smart. His ma had education, it appears, and being plumb stuck on poetry, named him after a couple of poets. I wonder if she ever thought her darling would grow up to be a gambler and a cactus burr under the saddle blanket of Cowlick?

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There wasn't a man in Cowlick or for a hundred miles around that didn't dream, plan and talk about either beating Shelley Bryant at poker, or catching him cheating.

Shore he cheated. He had to, to be that lucky. But nobody'd ever caught him at it —nobody alive. He was sudden death when he got riled, and he got riled easier'n a range-wild mossyhorn.

I'd been watching him like a hawk all through the game and I be blowed if I saw anything crooked. But it was there, I'd swear to it.

I hauled out my dollar watch and kind of jumped when I saw the time.

"Dorothy'll skin me alive," I rumbled, shoving my chair back.

Shelley, stacking coins with his long, strong fingers, looked up at me, squinting in the kerosene glare.

"Tell me, Stumpy," he says, softly, "what does the lovely Miss Stevens, who is beautiful enough to have her pick of men from the whole State, see in a tough, rawhide and gristle cownurse like you?"

"Somethin' you wouldn't know about, Shelley," I tell him. "My heart of gold."

With which I hurry out because I am late and Dorothy doesn't like to be kept waiting.

THE STREET is dark and empty except up near the Palace Hotel where a regular little wagon train has hauled up and is milling around in the light coming out of open doors and windows.

I went hurrying past, not stopping, but noticing the gilt painted legend on the coaches and freight wagons:

WHEELER'S TRAVELING THESPIANS

There were some good-looking gals talking and giggling around the doors and men all prettied up in frock coats and beaver hats. Actors all right. Cowlick was about to get a dose of culture and enlightenment. Well, Dorothy'd be pleased.

She didn't look none too happy when I busted in. She was tapping her foot and she had that look in her eye. She's only a little thing, could walk under a horse, I always say, but she's got a full-growed temper and the snappingest black eyes in twelve states.

"Guess what I saw?" I start in quick, trying to head her off.

"A pair of deuces," Dorothy snaps. "And Shelley Bryant had a pair of tens."

"It was kings," I mumble.

"And you've worked a solid month just to hand your wages over to Shelley Bryant!" she explodes. "Stumpy Parker, what's the matter with you? Are your brains completely addled?"

I backed up.

"You work hard for your money," she goes on, well wound up, "hard and long and dangerously. And you don't have it an hour before you give it to that worthless gambler who never did a day's work in his life, but just sits there and lets you boys work for him so he can take it from you! What's the matter with all of you?"

With which she starts to cry. This panics me and I don't know what to say. How can I explain that every man in Cowlick has made it his life's ambition to catch Shelley cheating and then match draws with him? She'd say we were loco.

Anyway our date is shot into more pieces than a glass ball at a rodeo. Dorothy calms down and hands me my time.

"Kindly remove yourself," she says, "and don't come back until you can give me some assurance that this nonsense has stopped. I will not waste my time with a gambler, Stumpy!"

Feeling lower'n a centipede's arches, I fork my bronc and head for home. I am broke, I have just lost my gal— Oh, it has been a very successful evening.

For a week I stay out on the range, brooding, with only cows for company. But sulking gets me nowhere, so Saturday I borrow ten bucks from the foreman, slick myself up and head for town.

Cowlick has blossomed out since my last visit. Posters for Wheeler's Traveling Thespians are plastered all over town. The old op'ry house, I see when I ride past, has been taken over and spruced up. Looks like Wheeler expects a good run in Cowlick.

I ride past the Golden Girl where Shelley Bryant hangs out and turn into Dorothy's street. Outside her door I groundrein the cayuse, slap off the alkali and beat a timid tattoo on the front door. Dorothy opens it.

"Stumpy Parker," she says, with no noticeable welcome.

She hesitates, so I take the opportunity to edge myself in.

"Oh—ah—Stumpy," Dorothy says, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Roughhead—Bill Roughhead."

For the first time I see there's another gent in the room. One look and I have him tagged, tied and branded as one of Wheeler's Thespians. He is a good-looking young scamp with a bright and cheerful eye. Meeting him at a line camp or chuckwagon I might have taken quite a shine to him, but at the moment I give him a scowl.

"Mr. Roughhead and I," says Dorothy, prim-like, "have been discussing the future of the theatre in the West, and the part which Cowlick can play in pioneering for culture and art."

Leastways, I think that's what she says. Words are hitting me from all angles.

"Too bad you can't stay, Mr. Parker," Dorothy says sweetly, edging me toward the door.

"Why, shore I can," I gulp, but she cuts me off short.

"What I said last week still goes," she snaps in a stage whisper. "Vamos, dust, hit leather, pull your freight, make tracks, quit the flat!"

I CAN take a hint, so I get out and climb on my bronc and head straight back to the Golden Girl. No woman can push me around. And if she wants little Mr. Roughhead of the Thespians, she can have him.

Shelley Bryant is playing himself a game of solitaire and watching himself in the mirror to see he don't cheat himself, when I tromp in. He ain't much interested in me, knowing I haven't been paid. But I flash the ten dollars and make noises like a card game and finally be unbends enough to scoop up the cards and wave me to a chair across from him.

A couple of other fellows sit in and we get up a tired sort of game. Mebbe Shelley is amusing himself with me, but I start to win. And in no time at all, I have run that sawbuck into a hundred pesos, American.

"Lady luck must be sharin' my saddle tonight," I say, and grin.

Shelley looks at me, his eyes expressionless like always.

"To quote my distinguished forebear," he said, " 'Kings are like stars—they rise and set, they have the worship of the world, but no repose.' "

"Flattery will get you no place," I says.

Somebody leans over my shoulder, breathes on my neck and then a polite voice says:

"Gentlemen, would it be possible for an interested bystander to join your pleasant little game?"

The voice is familiar. It is Mr. William Roughhead, from whom I have just parted in Dorothy Stevens' house.

"You're gettin' off on the wrong foot, Billy boy," I tell him. "I got my ridin' orders for keepin' bad company, just like you're doin'."

Shelley Bryant looks up at that, and his eyes are quick with understanding. The actor never turns a hair. He pulls out a chair and sits down, placing a nice stack of gold coins in front of him.

The party quits loping about then and goes into a gallop. Money and cards start sailing around the table and things move so fast you have to be mighty sharp to keep your finger on the pulse of things, so to speak.

Ain't no use in boring you with the details of the hands. I work my way down from the hundred to about sixty dollars. Shelley is still making it, and Mr. Roughhead is losing. I am so busy watching Shelley's quick fingers that I hardly see my own cards.

But when the blowoff comes I never did see it. One minute Shelley is dealing, his hands just a blur, the next this Roughhead has reached clear across the table and caught the dealer's wrist in his fingers.

Everybody freezes. They are like statues for a second, eyes locked, fingers not moving. Then the actor moves his hand from Shelley's wrist.

A card falls from somewheres, lands face up on the table.

It is an ace.

Roughhead gets up, very deliberately.

"I don't play with cheats," he says, wiping his hands on a handkerchief.

We hold it for a second more, jaws dropping. It is the first and only time I ever saw Shelley Bryant's mask crack plumb open. Rage and murder flash over his face. And his hand dips like magic for his six-gun.

"Look out!" I yip.

A little derringer appears like magic in Roughhead's hand and pops. It is the most amazin' fast draw I've ever seen. But the slug isn't enough to stop a big hombre like Shelley. It catches him in the left arm and spins him, but his big six-shooter is coming up and it looks like curtains for Roughhead. It is then I kick over the table.

ROUGHHEAD ducks. The other players scramble for safety on their hands and knees. And Shelley, down on one knee, blood dripping from his left hand onto the scattered cards at his feet, teeth drawn back in a snarl, is lining his bucking six-gun on the actor.

I didn't exactly love Bill Roughhead like a brother. But I loved Shelley a lot less. And Roughhead had done the thing I'd been trying to do for years—catch Shelley cheating. I can't just set there and see Shelley kill the little feller, even if he is an actor. So I match Shelley's shot and I put a slug where it will do the most good, and rid Cowlick of a crooked gambler.

The shooting dies away and we all got to our feet except Shelley, who won't ever again.

"Amen," I say.

"Thanks, friend," Roughhead says.

"That was the quickest draw I ever seen," I tell him, "but let it be a warnin' to you. Get a heavier cannon than that little pop-gun."

I am best man at the wedding between Dorothy and Bill Roughhead three days later. I decide to be a good sport about it.

"He's a good little ranny," I tell the blushing bride, "and lightning with his hands."

"He should be," she says.

"Yes?" I reply, not understanding. "And furthermore, he is the only man who ever caught Shelley with an ace up his sleeve."

"He didn't have an ace up his sleeve, Stumpy," Bill says. "He was dealing from the bottom of the deck."

"Huh? I saw you pull an ace out of his sleeve myself!"

"Yes," Bill sighs. "I had to. I couldn't prove he was dealing from the bottom. He was too fast and too good. So I had to plant that ace on him."

"You p-p-p-p—"

"Yes, I planted it on him."

Dorothy smiles at me.

"You never did see Wheeler's Thespians, did you, Stumpy? Bill is the magician. It was child's play for him to take an ace out of Shelley's sleeve, or produce a derringer out of thin air or anything else."

Bill reaches over and takes an egg out of my collar.

"See?" Dorothy says.

"I guess so," I mumbled.

I go out and look for my cayuse. I am thinking, this was the first time a gambler had ever been removed from town by magic.

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"I said 'stop' and I mean it, hombre"

Calaboose Key

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Mustanger Tex Haney battles to tame a mob incited to lynching fury!

STRAIGHT and tall, his slab-muscled body encased in faded range garb, Tex Haney watched the diminishing cloud of dust that marked the cavalcade of horsemen galloping across the plain toward Sunburst. They were taking

a man to jail. And Tex knew the man was innocent.

Hidden behind a manzanita bush atop the mesa rim he had seen the framed trap of smoldering fire in the gully below, the running-iron nearby and the calf thrown and tied beside it. Tex had only a glimpse of the young cowhand who rode up to investigate before horsemen erupted from the mesquite thicket at the right and threw down on the startled youngster with cocked Winchesters.

"The leader looked like that feller Pood Johnson of the Double O," Tex muttered to himself. "He seems to be the curly wolf around here."

For a moment Haney's big-boned face became somber. His lips straightened to a thin, hard line. Then he shrugged, and looked down to where the top of his high-heeled Justin boot had been cut away and caked blood glued sock and pants to his left leg just above the ankle.

"We got our own troubles, ain't we, hoss?" he said, leaning over and patting his deep-chested roan on the neck. "Mebbeso that kid'll get out of it on his own account, without help from us."

The horse snorted, and Haney went on.

"Right now first thing we got to do is get down to that ranchhouse yonder and see if we can get some water to wash this plugged leg of mine before she festers."

Tex reflected grimly on the recent events that had left him wounded, and hiding on the mesa rim. A mustanger, he hunted the bands of wild horses that were still left in the back country of the Southwest. When he caught a few, he broke and trained them, then drove them into town and sold them. Mostly they were inbred scrub stock, but now and then Tex would come across a leader that was all horse and a winner. Occasionally he found a branded stallion, a tame horse that had broken loose and gone wild, leading a band of mustangs in the wild horse country.

THAT was how Tex had come across Pood Johnson's prize black stallion, Midnight Blue, wearing the Double O brand on his sleek haunches. Selling the rest of his catch, Tex located the Double O brand as belonging in Sunburst and brought the black stallion up to return it to its owner. Customarily such owners paid a handsome reward for their horses.

Instead big, arrogant, pig-eyed Pood accused Tex of being a horse thief. Words and gunplay followed. Johnson was backed by a group of hired hands that looked more like gunslicks than honest cowboys to Tex. The mustanger, fighting for his rights, caught a slug low down in the left leg. One of the gunslicks fell. With Johnson's wolf pack after him in full cry, Tex had eluded pursuit and found a temporary haven on the mesa top.

Now all he wanted to do was to get out of Sunburst Valley. He felt sorry for the kid he had seen picked up as a calf brander, but if he went to Sunburst to tell what he knew he would be held on a murder warrant for downing one of Johnson's gun-throwers. A fellow had his own neck to think of first.

Descending a steep cut in the mesa slope, Tex had to pass the spot where the staged branding fire had been burning in the gully. He stopped to look the ground over. The embers of the greasewood fire were now black and cold. But near them something glinted in the dry soil. Tex picked it up. It was an iron key, the kind to fit an old-fashioned padlock. It had been dropped, evidently by the person who built the fire, and tramped into the ground by a heeled boot. Tex regarded the key thoughtfully for a moment. Then he thrust it carefully in his pocket.

Riding on, he approached the low-roofed, unpainted board ranchhouse warily. A lazy plume of pungent wood smoke spiraled upward from the house chimney into the blue, cloudless Arizona sky.

Tex saw the gleam of sunlight on a rifle barrel poked through a front window at the same time that he heard the rifle holder's shrill-voiced command.

"Stay where you are, before I drill you."

"Them's tall words for a button," Tex opined, squinting into the window as he

rein-guided his roan in toward the hitching-rail beyond a tree near the front door.

"I said 'stop', and I meant it, hombre."

Tex wheeled his horse to see a girl about twenty years old approaching.

"Gosh, ma'am," he stammered, "you sure ain't no button, but you're the size of one, though."

He studied the slight, slim-bodied girl for a moment. Anger sparkled in her clear eyes, and she held her chin high. In riding breeches, boots and her plain denim shirt, she might have been taken for a boy but for the mop of soft, silky black hair that cascaded over her straight shoulders. "What do you want?" she demanded. "You don't look like one of Johnson's killers."

"I ain't," said Tex grinning and motioning toward his wounded leg, and took a limping step forward. "Had a run in with that Johnson outfit myself," he said.

"Why didn't you say so?" cried the girl, flushing. She set the gun down inside the doorway. "I'm Mary Bentley. Reckon you're a stranger or you would have known, Dad's in town. Come and get that boot off. There's lots of hot water on the stove."

AS TEX limped into the house after her, she added. "You must think I'm terribly inhospitable, but there's been so much trouble lately."

"Bad trouble?" asked Tex.

"I'm afraid so," she said quietly and motioned Tex over to a sofa at the far side of the room. "Cut away that trouser leg," she ordered. "I'll get water and clean bandages in a jiffy, Mr. —?"

"Juts call me Tex, ma'am."

She looked at him quizzically for a moment, then smiled. "All right—Tex," she said. Despite her curiosity Mary knew her Western frontier etiquette too well to risk embarrassing a stranger by asking questions. Particularly a wounded stranger who was tall and dark, and carried his six-gun thonged down against his lean thigh.

As she headed toward the kitchen, Tex

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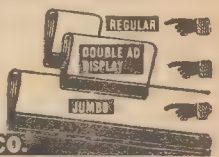

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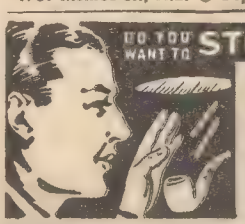

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spoke to her again. He was thinking she was the prettiest range-bred girl he had ever seen.

"Ma'am," he said, "you act like you've done this sort of thing before."

"I have—often," she replied from the other room. "Dad's the sheriff."

Tex Haney's eyes jumped, then hardened momentarily. He whistled under his breath. "Wish he was here," he muttered to himself. "Him and me ought to have a pow-wow. Right now!"

When Mary Bentley came back Tex was staring vacantly out the window.

"My, you're slow," she said laughingly. "Here, give me that clasp knife."

Tex obeyed and watched as she carefully cut away the cloth from around the wound. Deftly she washed and dressed it.

"You'll have to wear that old boot until you get to town, and can buy a new pair," she said when she had finished.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Tex, though town was one place he had no intention of going. "You're better than a regular sawbones."

He knew he ought to be leaving quickly. Yet somehow he wanted to linger. For a moment the girl looked deep into his eyes. Tex felt a new warmth pulsing through his veins.

He thought of that kid being railroaded off to jail and the evidence he could give that would probably clear him, and of the key in his pocket that might clinch it. But it would be the key to the calaboose for him if he went into Sunburst and told his story. A fellow had to look out for his own neck first. Or did he always?

This slender girl standing in the open doorway beside him had taken him in and dressed his bullet-torn leg just as if he had been her own brother needing help. Yet he could have been a robber, a renegade, or even a killer.

Maybe he ought to head for Sunburst after all, though back in the Little Cat Mountains was space and sunlight, and peace and freedom. It was a hard choice to make. Meantime he had to get away from here. The girl was watching him quietly, waiting for him to say something.

"I gotta be going," he stated. "Thank you, ma'am, for what you done."

Mary forced a smile to her lips, and held out her hand. "So long, stranger."

TAKING her hand in his, Tex thrilled at how warm and soft it felt nestling in his own strong grip. Suddenly the girl turned and went swiftly inside the house. She waited until Tex was gone. Then pent-up emotion overcame her and she threw herself on the sofa sobbing.

"Why," she murmured over and over again, "aren't there men like that in Sunburst Valley? They'd whip Pood Johnson and his gunslicks."

Sunburst wasn't much of a town, Tex decided, as he rode at an easy pace down Main Street. At the far end of town, Tex found the building he was looking for.

Grizzled, gray-haired old Sheriff Ash Bentley, worry lines etched on the tanned, parchment-like skin on his forehead, glanced around when Tex entered.

"I'm Tex Haney," the mustanger announced flatly.

The sheriff started, his right hand dropping automatically toward his holstered gun. Then he saw Tex smile, and he relaxed.

"Gettin' jumpy in my old age," he said. "Come to give yorself up, or didn't you know Pood Johnson swore out a horse-stealin' and murder warrant against you?"

"I knew," said Tex. "Just thought I'd come in and tell my side of the story."

The old lawman shook his head sadly.

"Sit down," he said gently. "Shuck your hardware, and spill your yarn. I'll listen, but it won't do you much good. It's the way you tell your story to the jury that's going to count."

Tex laughed bitterly. Giving himself up this way wasn't easy. "If I get a jury trial," he said.

Anger flashed in Bentley's eyes.

"Pood Johnson may claim to be the big holler in Sunburst," snapped the sheriff, "but he ain't the whole valley. At least not yet. As long as I'm sheriff you'll get a jury trial."

Then Tex related his story. The sheriff heard him out attentively. It was wide of the version Johnson had given when swearing out the warrants against Haney. Yet it had the ring of truth in it. "Son," Bentley said finally, "maybe you'd have been smarter to have kept travelin'."

"I thought about it a heap," answered Tex. "But you got a kid who don't belong in jail, locked up."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed sharply. "How do you know, Haney?" he asked.

Tex wondered at the sheriff's sudden emotion as he told all he had seen from the hideout on the mesa rim.

When he finished, he pulled the key out of his pocket and laid it on the desk.

"You don't have to believe me," he said. "That key belongs to the feller who built the fire. When he misses it, he'll likely go back huntin' for it. What if a smart lawman was to be up on the mesa, waitin'?"

"Son," growled the sheriff, "the door's open, and I could turn my back. But I'm goin' to lock you up. Hate to do it, but your testimony'll be needed when that kid comes to trial. My daughter will thank you plenty, Haney. She's crazy about that kid."

Tex should have been happy. He had done the right thing. But a sudden, lead weight seemed pulling at his heart. "You mean he and she are sweethearts?"

The sheriff looked up quickly. "Good gosh, no. Ted's her brother."

Miraculously the weight lifted. "This Johnson feller," said Tex, "roars mighty big for one man. Regular he-hellion."

Again the worry lines cresed old Ash Bentley's forehead. "Worse than that, son. He's trying to ruin, drive out, or kill all the little ranchers and honest people who settled long ago in the Sunburst Valley."

Tex listened while the sheriff told the old story of a ruthless, range-greedy cattle baron, power mad, determined to become dictator of an always growing domain.

"There's always some'll toady to a feller like that," concluded Bentley. "The rest of us have tried to stop him every honest way we knew. Now he's set on breaking

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me and getting in a sheriff of his own."

"That's why he framed Ted?"

"Must be." The sheriff rose. Taking Tex's gun he slipped it in the drawer. "Come on," he said, "reckon jail is the safest place for you while I see what luck I have out at the mesa."

Bentley introduced Ted as he locked Tex in the adjoining cell. "I don't give him the run of the place," the lawman explained, "because that's what Johnson's dupes are hoping for. It'd give them campaign talk. Mary'll bring in your supper. I'll stop by and tell her we got two to feed, instead of one."

WHEN he left, the jail was silent for a long time. Mary's brother was older than she and a little on the sullen side. Tex tried to cheer him up.

"Paw's got this thing all wrong," volunteered young Bentley. "Maybe I should have told him before he left. That election angle is sour."

Tex pricked up his ears. "Huh!"

"Yeah. There's a lot more than the election at stake. Like a fool I got too pally with some of Johnson's gunslicks, and learned stuff I wasn't supposed to know. Johnson found it out."

"Yuh can talk at the trial."

Ted Bentley laughed bitterly. "There ain't goin' to be any trial. Pood intended for his men to gun me at the trap, but I kept clear of my shooting-iron."

"How do you figure they'll get you now?" asked Tex.

"Rouse the mob. Storm the jail maybe. Cattle rustlers ain't exactly popular." Then he added: "Nor horse thieves, either."

"And your pap's gone," said Tex slowly. "Isn't there a deputy around?"

Ted laughed. "Sure, Link Crowley. Dad appointed him, but he went and sold out to Johnson, lock, stock and barrel."

Tex didn't like it. In the silence that ensued he heard a growing clamor of voices coming down the street.

"Ted," he called. "Hear that! We got to see if Link's out in the office. Rattle the doors. Holler."

The two created a bedlam second only to that gathering up the street. But here was no response.

Shouts of, "thieves," "rustlers," were audible now above the tramp of marching feet. Tex wished the cell block's tiny barred windows looked out on the street so he could see how many were there. He didn't mind dying, but he hated to be trapped this way.

"Bein' a hero," he muttered bitterly to himself, "was sure nice while it lasted."

"Tex!"

He wheeled, snatched the gun thrust toward him through the bars.

"Mary!"

In riding skirt and gaily colored shirtwaist Mary Bentley fumbled with the big iron key ring for the cell key. "I was bringing supper to you and Ted," she panted. "Dad told me. Heard the commotion up the street and dodged up the alley. Came in the back way."

The cell lock clicked open. "Hurry, Tex," she added. "No time to lose. That fool Link Crowley is trying to talk to the crowd outside the *open* front door. They'll rush him. The back way, Tex! My horse—"

Even before she finished shots rang out. Leaders of the mob rushed through the front office, guns blazing. The girl dropped to the floor. Groaning, Tex returned the fire through the bars. He saw the first man clutch at his throat, spin crazily and pitch headlong to the floor.

HOT anger blanched Tex's face. A murderous hate that men could do such things filled his soul, as, unmindful of the lead that screamed by him, he jerked open the cell door and stood astride of the girl's fallen body. As coolly as a man shattering clay pipes in a shooting gallery, Tex fired. A second man went down. Then another.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Ted's cell door open just as a Johnson man fired. Uttering a cry, the sheriff's son collapsed. Tex shot the killer down.

Stepping over dead bodies, he made his way into the sheriff's office. The street

was a shouting maelstrom of men milling around the returning Sheriff Bentley. Ahead of him the little man was herding a manacled prisoner. Bentley pushed his prisoner inside, and turned to the crowd.

"All right, boys," he shouted. "Get Johnson's men. I've got Pood here."

He turned to Tex. "That wasn't no real jail rush. Johnson's gang staged it, tried to get the decent citizens in with them. It seems to me you took care of things all right. Where's Ted?"

Tex tried to speak, but the old man stopped him. "Caught Pood lookin' for the key like you said he might. It was his all right. Fits the lock on one of the outbuilding's at his ranch which was full of blotted-brand hides that'll clear Ted."

The sheriff paused, expecting Tex to speak. "Reckon Ted's cleared already, Mr. Bentley," stammered Tex.

"Dead?"

Tex nodded. "Mary, too."

"Mary!" The old man swayed.

"She brought us the guns," said Tex slowly. "Unlocked the cells, and gave us our chance to fight."

Ash Bentley looked at Tex's drawn features. Then he yelled loudly for his daughter.

"Coming, Dad!" answered Mary's voice.

A feather would have bowled Tex over. His head swam dizzily.

"Hurry up and catch this big he-man in here," continued the sheriff. "I—I think he's goin' to keel over." He swung toward Tex. "Taught her when she was a kid to hit the ground at gunfire. It's a heap safer than standin' up."

The next instant Tex's heart was pounding as Mary, dusty and tearful but all in one piece, came into the sheriff's office to sob in her father's arms. Tex looked grimly at the sullen and frightened Pood Johnson. "Sheriff," he said, "I reckon this place would smell better if I put this pole-cat in a cell."

The lawman nodded absently. Tex turned when he reached the door. Mary was watching him. For an instant their eyes met, and Tex knew then that Mary would be waiting for him.

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